

# “The Social Gospel”

Luke 6: 17-26

Epiphany 6C, Boise, 2022

In the Gospel of Luke, our Lord quotes Isaiah in the first sermon he preaches — it was in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth — to say that God has anointed him “to proclaim good news to the poor” [Lk 4: 18]. Now, here in his second sermon, the so-called Sermon on the Plain, the first line is “Blessed are you who are poor; for yours is the Kingdom of God.” In other words, “you may not have much, but be happy because, in receiving the ‘good news’ that I bring, you belong to the Kingdom. You live under God’s Reign and have the benefit of both his providential care and his perfect justice. And if the prosperity of those who care nothing for God now troubles you, or you are being oppressed by them, then just wait. As the Virgin Mary announced in her song, while I was yet in her womb, the day will arrive when they get their comeuppance, after which it will be said that God ‘has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, . . . and brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble and meek, . . . and has filled the hungry with good things,’ while sending ‘the rich away empty’ [1: 51-53].

“And so I say unto you who are rich in this second sermon I preach,  
Woe to you . . . , because you have [already] received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.  
Woe to you who now laugh, for you shall mourn and weep.  
Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

It seems that the Messiah has sharpened his message, since delivering the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount in the First Gospel. After descending here to the “plain,” he added those woes, so that the rich, well-fed, laughing, well-thought-of *bon vivants* of society who were listening might also have something to take home with them.

Is there a Social Gospel in the Scriptures? That is the question I'd like to explore with you today. The term originated with liberal Protestants in the later decades of the 19th century, when the conflict between labor and the owners of capital had become acute. We will end our service today with a hymn by a famous second-generation Social Gospeller, Henry Emerson Fosdick.

God of grace and God of glory,  
on thy people pour thy power;  
crown thine ancient Church's story;  
bring her bud to glorious power.

And make certain when you sing it that you don't miss the message of the 3rd stanza:

Cure thy children's warring madness,  
bend our pride to thy control;  
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal . . . .

Now much of that plea is quite conventional — and deserves to be. In both our Psalm and the passage we read from Jeremiah, the righteous man who puts his trust in God is compared to a tree planted by the waterside [Jer 17: 7-8; Ps 1: 1-3]. He flourishes in the face of life's vicissitudes, because God is the source of his life and strength. Contrast that to the man who relies on things other than God, whether they are bad friends or material wealth, gained perhaps by evil machinations against unsuspecting innocents. That man's life will wither away

like a shrub in the desert. . . .  
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land [Jer 17: 6].

If riches come by honest means, well, then, enjoy them. But don't put your trust in them. Don't think they will make you secure or self-sufficient. Nothing on earth can do that.

But given all that the Bible says about God's love for the poor, acting as

their avenger when oppressed, do we need to go beyond that bedrock wisdom not to trust in riches ourselves? If God looks after the poor, should those of us who aren't poor look for ways to serve as the instruments of that providential care? Hence, I return to my question, Is there a Social Gospel in the Scriptures, a good news specifically for the poor, in which the Church actively participates to bring to fulfillment?

Over the last several decades, Roman Catholic bishops have issued a number of statements regarding the Christian's duty to promote charity and justice, and in them we find, as a guide to public policy as well as personal action, the recurring phrase "preferential option for the poor." The bishops are not, of course, advocating discrimination (or unequal justice) in courts of law, but they are signaling that in some sense a society is to be judged especially on its treatment of the poor. In the first half of the 20th century, Protestant leaders of mainline denominations tended to blame capitalism for not just the mistreatment of the poor, but for the fact that poverty even continued among the growing affluence of industrial society. Paul Tillich, a theologian assigned to be read in nearly every mainline seminary, including those of the Episcopal Church, stated outright that "any serious Christian must be a socialist." One Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, agreed. An oft-repeated saying in those days was that "socialism is the economics of which Christianity is the religion." Perhaps I should explain to the younger members of our congregation that socialism, when it was widely practiced, had two versions. In the harder Soviet version, private property was abolished, thus eliminating the distinction between the "haves" and "have-nots." In the softer British version practiced before Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, the state removed all major industry from private hands, with the intent that workers receive the full value of his labor.

As many of you are aware, the socialist idea is experiencing a comeback

among a portion of today's youth, especially those who have spent a significant amount of time in a university. Most persons of my generation say to them, "you need to learn some history. Socialism in both its versions has been tried and found wanting. In 1989, the hard version, Communism, collapsed in Eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall came down. A revolution had begun earlier in Poland when a pope, one of those guys who talked about a "preferential option for the poor," visited that country, his native country in which he had been its most prominent bishop, to speak for freedom and show his support in particular for labor union that was not under state control.

That pope, John Paul II issued an encyclical two years later, *Centesimus Annus* — named that because it was the 100th year or anniversary of an encyclical issued by Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, which means "new things." The latter had been the first official papal statement in modern times that addressed social conditions, and since then there have been many. Among the new things mentioned by Leo XIII were the industrial revolution and the conflicts between capital and labor that followed. *Rerum Novarum* was issued at the same time the Social Gospel was at its peak in this country. Leo tried to be evenhanded. The encyclical denounced socialism and defended the right to hold private property, and also the right of workers to organize and demand a just wage, defined as one that was sufficient for a man to support his family.

Now John Paul writes a century later as one who was instrumental in bringing socialism to an end in Eastern Europe and working with a labor union to do it. He, of course, endorses his predecessor's positions on private property and labor unions, but he does not repeat Leo's condemnation of liberalism, sometimes today called "neoliberalism," the philosophy found in the writings of John Locke and our own Declaration of Independence that the purpose of government is to protect the freedom of individuals and private parties. Instead, John Paul sets forth a qualified version of that political doctrine with which we

Americans are well familiar, attempting to ground it in the Church's historic teaching on man.

Freedom belongs to men and women by right, he says, because it is integral to their being, their being creatures in the image of God. Human beings were made for God, to respond to his love for them, loving Him in return and showing love to one another. Freedom is the necessary condition for love; it cannot be compelled. You all know that from your Catechism.

Yet personal freedom is much restricted under socialism, and denied altogether in the stricter Soviet version. As the very name of the doctrine indicates, society in the form of the state has all the rights; individuals and private associations which include the Church have none. The justification used for the lack of private freedoms was that rearranging society by their principles would give persons equal access to wealth held by the state for the benefit of all, providing them with security from want. But as John Paul himself experienced as a Polish citizen and bishop, this denial of man's freedom, which also involved a denial of the Creator who gave it, led to the complete degradation of civil society and an impoverishment of nearly everyone who was not a state official.

The next step in the argument that John Paul makes in *Centesimus Annus* concerns the dignity of work. Those of us who can work base our identity in part on the work we do, or once did before retirement. It is necessary for human flourishing that men and women be able to choose the work they do and to perform it freely with minimal restrictions by the state. John Paul thus advocates a free market, in which individuals and private associations take their own initiative in producing goods and services, are able freely to exchange them, and to acquire property that can be put to use as productive capital for further enterprise, if they so choose. As he explained to an audience when introducing the encyclical, and here I quote,

Economic freedom is an aspect of human freedom, which cannot be separated from its other aspects and which must contribute to the full

realization of people in order to construct an authentic human community [quoted by Richard John Neuhaus in *Doing Well and Doing Good*, p. 184].

Just as Leo XIII noted the “new things” in society when he wrote in 1891, John Paul notes things that are new in the national economies that developed in a condition of freedom since WWII, and which were lacking in the unfree economies of Eastern Europe. Pre-industrial societies were based on land. Hence, in Biblical times, a few persons possessed most of the wealth, and the others worked the owners’ land as slaves or hired hands. Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah denounced the unfair advantage that many landlords were taking of the poor, and reminded them that God sees everything — a message that turns up again in the version of the Beatitudes we read in St Luke. Leo XIII addressed the conditions of early capitalism in which the profit margins were narrow, and the owners were constrained to get as much as they could from labor for a subsistent or less-than-subsistent wage. In both a land-based and an early-capitalist economy, it often seemed that the distribution of a society’s wealth was a zero-sum game, in which whatever was taken by workers was taken from the owners, and vice versa.

But in the dynamic, wealth-producing economies that developed in the West after WWII in a condition of freedom, as opposed to the stagnant, unfree economies of Eastern Europe, the rich got richer while most of the poor ceased to be poor. It should be an undisputed fact that a dynamic, advanced capitalism has done more to lift people from poverty than all acts of private charity and redistributions of wealth by the state combined. John Paul II, the pope from Eastern Europe, wanted to see that extended to his native Poland and its surrounding countries, and to the underdeveloped countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In the encyclical, he sees great promise in free enterprise and free markets that work especially for the poor, granting them new opportunities to experience the dignity of creative work, which for some will include learning the skills and disciplines needed to enter professions or become entrepreneurs

themselves. He presents an inclusive vision in the encyclical, one that brings the world's poor into an expanding circle of the free exchange of goods and services. You might call it a capitalism with "a preferential option for the poor," one that is not based on greed but on a charitable desire of those who seek God to spread both freedom and wealth to those who yet lack them.

Should such be the new Social Gospel? The pope was not dogmatic on that point. Rather, he invited not only the members of his own church but "all people of goodwill" into a discussion on the morality of free markets. And the Catholic Church regards all moral matters as belonging to "the Gospel of the Kingdom of God." God's gift of salvation when it is accepted yields practical, this-world results in changed behavior. The full realization of a redeemed society in which persons live for God and one another must await until the end, when Christ returns. But the practical result of accepting Jesus as one's Lord and Saviour is that one comes increasingly under God's Reign in the present, by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no Social Gospel in addition to the Good News of salvation, but that single Gospel announced by our Lord and preached by the apostles has a social dimension. It must if it is about the coming of God's Kingdom, which will encompass all things.

We can debate whether the kind of generous capitalism John Paul described is a practical corollary of the Christian understanding of man, but we should all be able to see that the Gospel extends well beyond one's personal response to the news that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead to give us new life. Our collective response to that message can and will lead to a renewal of society based on our love for one another and especially for the poor.

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