

“Victors on the Margin”
June 27, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

Think of the homeless. Drug addicts. Picture the alcoholic vets who refuse to leave the bridge underpass for treatment at the Veterans Hospital. Think of the fellows in Farragut Park, DC, who depend on sandwiches given out by sweet white kids on mission trips. Picture the lady living in the cardboard box on the street corner babbling and drooling.

Think of them.

Now banish them from your mind because we're not talking about them when we talk about the poor and homeless.

There is a whole different breed who live on the margin of society. Many of them you wouldn't even guess as poster children for the homeless.

Picture instead your own children.

~~~

The Bible says much about the poor because it says a whole lot about the rich. There's no sin in being rich, just that being rich makes it easier to sin. And we who aren't rich can become complicit.

Those who are rich can easily slip into thinking they actually deserve being rich. You begin to expect being fussed over, for the entitlement of the rich far exceeds that of those on welfare. Where's my stock options? I'm the CFO -- where's my reserved parking place? Perquisite and privilege. You grow accustom to the favoritism. Exactly why does an administrator at Geisinger deserve better parking than a janitor?

Affluence separates you from your community. Let's sail my yacht while turtles are choking on oil. Let us build the fancy house so we can avoid being bothered by our neighbors. If only the same amount of energy and expense went to building a home.

Unlike affluence, poverty can bring us together. We're in it together. The real question of faith is not "are you better off?" but, "is your neighbor better off?"

Which is why this passage warns against fawning over the rich. God doesn't check wallets to determine who is worth saving.

This text from James takes us back to the very first congregations. Merely years from the resurrection and they're rushing up to suck up to the rich, to the celebrities who come to be with them.

This letter from Jesus' brother, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, almost can be heard as if being poor is a virtue. How the church has spun the Bible sometimes has been really screwy. An inverse spiritual snobbery. I'm broke, so that means I'm closer to God. I have no material possessions, therefore I am purer.

Yeah, right.

Which, by the way, is a wonderful way for the rich and powerful to manipulate the poor. Get them believing it is noble to be poor. Suffer now for an eternal reward later.

**Listen: James 2: 1-7**

If you think there is a spiritual virtue in being poor, try it for a while.

Grinding you down. It's draining being worried all the time.

I remember having to decide between buying shoes for my kids or paying my taxes. I bought the shoes. My stomach was twisted in knots for months. Many folk define fiscal affluence as being able to put 10 bucks of gas into the tank and having enough stamps to mail letters.

Folks tend to behave as they are treated. When our Confirmation Class cooked and served at the Jubilee Kitchen, there was one person there in charge who tried to joke with our kids. They were setting out the free desserts. She came back and joked. "Now watch the animal stampede."

That's not a joke. That's jaded to the point of disrespect. People are not numbers or animals. This 'joke,' I allege, was itself brought on the how we run the Jubilee Kitchen. By making everything free, they set up the guests to act greedily. You treat someone like a dog, they'll act like a dog.

~~~

The American Dream. Where is it? What happened to it?

After I returned from my cross country tour, lots of folks asked me, "How was it?"

Frankly, I came home profoundly depressed. I also came back recognizing how fortunate we are here, how good we got it.

Where I went, I saw us in serious economic trouble. Please note, I drove through places where most people don't. Back roads. But what I saw is that most of the country is more similar to Mount Carmel or Centralia than Danville.

Industry gone. Closed up warehouses. Boarded up main streets. Acres of depressed communities. You know it's bad when towns are trying to turn a buck by Alien Museums and gifts shops, or, like Winslow, Arizona, trading on one line in a song to bring in tourists.

The Great Divide is widening. I didn't see much middle class out there. What little I saw is thinning. Danville's still okay because we still have a middle class.

~~~

Yes, sometimes the poor are their own worst enemies. Check out my diagnostic tool (see below) I drafted and wanted Good Samaritan to use. Smoking. Lazy. Never taught by momma how to roast a chicken. Children born out of wedlock. Victims themselves producing victims as long as we choose to remain victims. Can we please remember that the poor are not villains. Tragic, yes. Pathetic, some.

I got quizzed the other day by someone who read the Press Enterprise from three Sunday's ago. How much money, I was asked, is spent by people in Montour County in a year on lottery tickets? I guessed \$300,000. She said I guessed

the highest. But I came up shy. Folks here spend over \$5 million a year on the lottery.

\$5 million in lottery tickets a year? Guess who the lottery business preys on? The poor. The desperate.

And we in the Recreation Authority got raked over the coals when we suggested one dollar per capita to take care of our ball fields and fix playgrounds? They fume about school taxes?

But its not always bad decisions.

Sometimes it is stacked up against them.

Over drafts fees. \$30. Which if you're juggling the checkbook, cutting it close, can lead to another bounced check. \$30 more.

Or if you get so confused, so exasperated, you burrow. You stop balancing or even recording the numbers and go into heavy duty denial: if I don't look at the bank statement my troubles will disappear.

Who gets penalized most for being poor and struggling to make it?

Two kids in diapers. Wife works at Grandview, night shift. You're on the line at Magee-Reiters. Rent is due. Deihl's won't pass your car for inspection unless you get new tires. You got to pay the rent, and if you can't drive you can't get to work, so pull out the credit card.

Credit cards? Great if you're rich. Crushing for everyone else. Been there. Had to put a daughter's semester tuition at Dickinson on Visa because we had no other way of paying.

And whho develops these cabalist calculations used by public assistance?

Someone I know applied for workman's compensation. He was holding down three part time jobs in order to tread water. One business closed. He lost that job. He was denied Workman's Compensation because he makes too much in the others. They told him that if he earned less he could get more.

~~~

Public Assistance is not Grove's responsibility. Since when is it the church's job to take care of everyone? We do have an obligation to our brothers and sisters of faith. When needy folks call for help, my first question is: "Which church do you belong to?"

Let the state do what the state and non-profits do what they do best:

- ▲ Forcing deadbeat dads to pay up.
- ▲ Supporting Head Start as the most effective deal in town
- ▲ Medical care for women and children
- ▲ Responding to crises with emergency relief

But can the state really fix the problem of Beaver Place, East Front Street, Maple Street?

~~~

The Acton Institute sketches out three types of 'the poor:'

- ▲ The destitute - those who require civic help for dire plight, those whose fortunes have been savaged by no fault of their own.
- ▲ The deserving poor - those who need temporary charity to help them become self-sufficient.
- ▲ The paupers -those who have been trained to expect charity.

Let's talk about unintended consequences.

Example: cane toads. Brought into Australia to combat an infestation of cane beetles. Now there are over 200 million of these poisonous cane toads (10 toads for each person in Australia). The native specie of lizards, snakes, small Marsupials are being killed off.

Unintended consequences.

There's a compelling body of evidence now showing that how we've done welfare since the sixties has backfired, especially in ghettos. By subsidizing single moms, we have telegraphed a message to young men that they are

irrelevant, that they don't need to own up to their responsibilities.

72 percent of births to black women -- out of wedlock.

51 percent of Hispanic births -- out of wedlock

28 percent of white births -- out of wedlock

- **National Center for Health Statistics, 2007**

We're facing a potential unintended consequence right now. The counselors at Riverside Elementary feel the need to provide back-packs of fruit, granola bars, for some kids to take home. Why? To make sure they have something healthy to eat over the weekend. They come to school Monday hungry.

Is the answer back-packs of free food? How many of the parents will the sell the food? How many kids will let the food rot because its not candy or burgers? Will the parents be asked to earn the food by getting credits for cleaning up the school playground? How many of the parents would make the effort? Do you let the kids go hungry because of these parents never themselves learned to be responsible parents?

What next should be free?

There's a fifth grader who couldn't care less about studying. Why should he? He wants to be just like Dad and collect Social Security.

~~~

We have a social oil spill messier and nastier than the one polluting the beaches of Louisiana.

Yet the remedy for poverty never can come from social programs, no more than congressional hearings will stop the leak, no more than hopping aboard the school bus will make you educated

~~~

Earlier I asked you to think about the poor and homeless. The demented lady off her meds who lives in a cardboard box. Then I asked you to forgot that image.

When we think of homeless, think instead of your own children.

If it weren't for family, for Elaine and I, two of my children would be homeless right now.

~~~

Most of the poor I know suffer something far worse than a lack of material resources. They lack spiritual and family resources. They are alone, broken, anonymous, cut off and disconnected from the accountability of a small community.

How many of you were able to go to college because of your parents or grandparents?

How many of you were able to buy your first home because of parents or grandparents?

I have to apologize here. We talk a good story about ministering to children. Foster Care. Adoptions. Working with our Elementary School. But we've only been dabbling. I've let so many obligations and opportunities to build up families slip through my fingers. I feel a fraud and Grove posing. We're quick to judge or dismiss. Not so quick to really get involved and dirty.

Whether or not it's the best, the state and non-profits are doing what they can. I don't blame the state. I blame the churches.

How can we Christians step up and do what we can do best. How can we bring Christ into the lives of these families so Christ can change minds, hearts, wills, attitudes?

There's only one way for those living on the margin to win: family.

- ▲ Healthy, solid marriages
- ▲ Strong fathers or father figures
- ▲ Inter-dependent, inter-generational families
- ▲ Children raised in decent homes
- ▲ Becoming part of a church

~~~

Here's the secret of Elijah's widow. The story ends with a miracle. Elijah visits this non-Jew and tells her to feed him. Hold on here, she doesn't even have enough for herself and her son. But she chooses to give. The grace of hospitality.

God through Elijah gives her an opportunity to step up. She steps up. She makes the choice to make the effort. She gives up her last.

As a reward, God takes her jar of meal and it suddenly becomes Strega Nona's magic pot: an endless supply. God takes her jar of oil and it too supplies endless oil.

Magical, miraculous, marvelous.

But maybe the real magic behind miracles is something quite mundane.

Elijah was Hebrew. She was not. A Hebrew widow would never have been left in such poverty leaving her worried as to where her son's next meal would come from. Family, community would embrace her. A mutual effort.

Elijah and this foreign widow demonstrate community at work, what happens when you invest in each other. They meet each other's need. Both give to the other.

Her generosity shames her neighbors, reminding her neighbors for them to be generous. They decide to make sure she and her boy are alright.

Her neighbors fill the role of her husband and the boy's father.

God fills jug and jar by what her neighbors bring over.

## Consequences of Poverty on Children

Source: Dr. Paul Kettlewell

| Children in poverty have increased risk for:                                                                                              | Implications? |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. Impaired brain development in early years                                                                                              |               |
| 2. Greater risk of significant behavior and emotional problems (10% of all children suffer such problems, 27% of all children in poverty) |               |
| 3. Trauma and abuse                                                                                                                       |               |
| 4. Parental substance abuse                                                                                                               |               |
| 5. Decreased interaction with parent due to maternal depression                                                                           |               |
| 6. Living with a single parent                                                                                                            |               |
| 7. Lower quality child care                                                                                                               |               |
| 8. Less educated mother                                                                                                                   |               |
| 9. Exposure to environmental toxins (air pollution, lead poisoning)                                                                       |               |
| 10. Low birth weight                                                                                                                      |               |
| 11. Infant mortality                                                                                                                      |               |
| 12. Higher rates of asthma                                                                                                                |               |
| 13. Higher rates of dental disease                                                                                                        |               |
| 14. Less likely to see a pediatrician                                                                                                     |               |
| 15. Less access to mental health providers                                                                                                |               |
| 16. Less likely to get immunized                                                                                                          |               |
| 17. Inadequate nutrition                                                                                                                  |               |
| 18. Lack of health insurance (19% of poor children lack health insurance compared with 10% of all children)                               |               |
| 19. Delayed development                                                                                                                   |               |
| 20. More school absences                                                                                                                  |               |
| 21. Lower literacy rates                                                                                                                  |               |
| 22. Lower grades in school                                                                                                                |               |

## Needs Assessment

[check the boxes that apply to your observation of the person]

### Internal Factors

- Poor nutrition
- Obesity
- Ignorance
- Lack of language skills
- Drop out from high school
- Illiteracy
- Drug use
- Alcohol abuse
- Use of tobacco products
- Gambler
- Early pregnancy
- Sexual promiscuity
- Lack of economic skills
- Grew up poor
- Abusive
- Lack of imagination
- Poor work ethic
- Depression
- Transient
- Over-educated
- Snob
- Divorcing spouse
- Fragmentation of family
- Low self esteem
- Lack of faith, spiritual support
- Is prejudiced toward others
- Preoccupied with self
- Greedy
- Indebtedness
- Other:

### External Factors

- Housing costs
- Lack of available job
- Lack of decent paying job
- Kept in part-time employment
- Cost of day care
- Lack of transportation
- Victim of accident or set back
- Disabled
- Death of income provider
- Health care costs
- Parental confusion
- Indifference of others
- Victim of domestic abuse
- Victim of divorce
- Victim of greed
- Victim of cultural expectations
- Victim of prejudice
- Victim of sexism
- Mentally ill
- Mentally challenged
- Brain damaged
- Other:

