

St James United Church

Message for October 23, 2022

Poverty Eradication Sunday (20th Sunday after Pentecost)



“Bootstraps and Other Myths”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Micah 6:1-8; Luke 18:9-14

As I said before the video, we can't avoid topics that speak to real lives for fear of being political. As people of faith, we take our cue here from the bible. It can be viewed as political in that it's concerned with how we live together, “politics” coming from *polis*, Greek for city. In it, we hear repeatedly how God is concerned with how we live together, with the wellbeing of all people, especially those of us struggling in one way or another. If this is God's concern, it must be ours.

We get a sense of this in our reading from Micah, the prophet first asking on behalf of the people what God wants, if they should double down on ritual sacrifice, and then answering for God how they've been mistaken. Satisfying God's teaching is based not on what they give to God but to one another. What God requires is simple: live justly with one another, make love their focus, and as they do, humbly remember that all they are and have is down to God's loving mercy.

As we listen to the parable, we may forget this, becoming self-congratulatory about who we are or what we have. As I say this you may think I'm speaking of the Pharisee, if Luke's introduction is believed. It makes sense if we think stereotypically of all Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites. Ironically in seeing them this way, we show the same contempt we assume the Pharisee showed the tax collector. We forget how Nicodemus, who spoke to Jesus about God's Reign, was a Pharisee, as was Simon, inviting Jesus to dinner because he was interested in what he had to say, overlooking that Jewish rabbis are their descendants, giving their people renewed spiritual purpose after the Temple was destroyed. We assume the Pharisee was rejected by God when the text just says the tax collector was the one forgiven. Given the Pharisee's spiritual life, perhaps he wasn't there for forgiveness but deeper connection with God, and so receiving graced righteousness that extended through him to others, including the tax collector, seen as unforgiveable by many.

I share that shift of perspective to highlight how easily we read a situation based not on facts but myths we buy into, especially ones laced with a degree of contempt towards others. This can be the case when it comes to those of us experiencing financial insecurity, living on fixed incomes and other supports that don't provide enough to live on, or the “working poor”, often with two or more jobs but barely getting by, the hidden poor, technically earning above the poverty line but still can't afford adequate food, heat, childcare, other basic necessities. The pandemic revealed how at risk many of us are, further exemplified in recent months with the rise in cost of living.

Despite how many people are impacted by poverty, myths abound. You hear how poverty is because of laziness, or lack of ability, or other “weaknesses”, that everyone can pull themselves out of poverty by their own bootstraps. This used to mean an impossible feat which it is because no one is self-made, every one of us beholden to the wider community, many “lucky” happenstances influenced by factors like race, gender, family history of education, our neighbourhood. We all have a starting point that influences how we fare beyond “hard work”. Working three jobs to make ends meet sounds like a lot of bootstrap raising to me and still it makes little difference.

An additional factor is intergenerational wealth, even a little extra helping someone make more. This is explained as the boots theory of economics by Sam Vimes in Terry Pratchett’s *Men at Arm*: “The reason that the rich were so rich...was because they managed to spend less money. Take boots, for example. He earned thirty-eight dollars a month plus allowances. A really good pair of leather boots cost fifty dollars. But an affordable pair of boots, which were sort of OK for a season or two and then leaked like hell when the cardboard gave out, cost about ten dollars... But the thing was that good boots lasted for years and years. A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while a poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars...in the same time and would still have wet feet.” A bit extra makes it possible to move forward, but many are simply stuck.

They are stuck, in part, because of another myth, that of the welfare queen, their “weakness” a lack of scruples, the “poor” most often a single mom, able to work but choosing to rip off the system through fraud, child endangerment, manipulation, accruing thousands on the taxpayers’ dime. It’s often a racialized trope, not grounded in fact, but used to justify barriers to access help, the demand to continually prove one’s need for assistance, benefits claw backs that actually discourage working, the person needing help seen as untrustworthy. It’s really about contempt.

In contrast, a program like Guaranteed Liveable Income, which ensures everyone has enough, is based on the assumption that everyone is worthy of respect, regardless of circumstance. And it’s been shown to work in a number of test cases, many given a benefit able to get ahead, now with the means to go back to school, start a business, get help with issues that perpetuated their situation. It’s also cheaper to manage than what we do now, and in the long run benefits us all. Ending poverty increases health outcomes and so lowers medical budgets, increases personal security and so lowers crime and associated costs, increases the chances for people to share their gifts which in turn increases everyone’s opportunities. Poverty can be eradicated, especially in a world as affluent as it is now in the 21st century. But do we have the will to do so?

I pray we do. After all, a Guaranteed Liveable Income is similar to income supplements for seniors or CERB given during the pandemic. We don’t hold back these helps because we see ourselves in the recipients. We can end poverty, but only if we stop telling the myths that block our doing so. May we respond instead to God’s story and extend loving mercy not just to a few but to all. Amen.