

## Sermon Proper 14 Year C

[RCL] Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psal 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

### Transforming our Vision

In June 2010, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett announced a new charity initiative for billionaires: the Giving Pledge. So far, Gates and Buffett have received pledges from 137 billionaires from around the world who have pledged to donate at least half of their fortunes to charity. Five years in, a total of 365 billion dollars has been pledged.

365 billion dollars is a lot of money, so much that it's hard to conceptualize. It's more than the total cost of damage from Hurricane Katrina, at 108 billion dollars; but far less than the total cost of The War on Terror since 2001, estimated at 1.7 trillion dollars. The total US budget for 2015 amounted to 3.7 trillion dollars—or about 10 times the amount this group of billionaires was able to pledge, for just one year. 365 billion wouldn't even cover the amount our government spends annually on discretionary items, like education, transportation, and the National Parks.

Of course, 365 billion dollars will make a difference in the lives of many people. This money will filter through charitable organizations and eventually work its way down to people on the ground, people who are hungry and need a meal, or homeless and need a place to sleep, or sick and need help paying for medical care. But 365 billion dollars isn't enough to fundamentally change the persistent patterns of need in the world.

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, reflecting on the charity initiative in his blog, thinks that this demonstrates that America has entered another gilded age, similar to the end of the 19th century, when “robber barons [like the Vanderbilts, Carnegies, and Rockefellers] lorded over the economy and almost everyone else lost ground.” The robber barons of the past, like the tech billionaires of today,

could afford to give away huge chunks of their fortune and still maintain their relative position and power. The gap between the rich and everyone else, after flattening out somewhat in the middle of the 20th century, continues to grow bigger and bigger, approaching what it was in that previous gilded age.

Now against charity, as Paul writes in the letter to the Galatians, there is no law. However, there is a difference between the popular idea of charity, and charity as a theological virtue. The theological virtue of charity that we are called to as Christians goes deeper than merely taking out our checkbooks and donating money to a good cause. Charity, or Caritas, is that selfless, unconditional, and voluntary lovingkindness we see in Jesus—it's the way Jesus loves us, and the way we are called to love others. Of course, it's easy to see how caritas could lead us to the modern kind of charity: one way we can behave with lovingkindness toward our neighbors is by giving them money to help them when they are in need.

But that is not where caritas ends. A Christian heart truly possessed of caritas begins to wonder, sooner or later, why the needs are so endless: why are there so many mouths to feed? Why are there so many people without a place to sleep? What are the conditions that create so much suffering in the world, and can we do anything to change those conditions?

Such questions can be dangerous. As Roman Catholic Bishop Dom Camara of Brazil once said: "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked why there were so many poor, they called me a communist." Communist is a dirty word, of course, because as a political and economic system, we know that it doesn't work. Capitalism does better in some ways, but without protections can run roughshod over the poor and weak.

In the end, the hope of the poor will never be in a human political system—human systems always have a tendency toward corruption. No, the place we find hope, the place we are called to live into, to build up, as we listen for and respond to the cries of the poor, can only be the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus says to his followers: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your

possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Jesus’ central message during his life on earth was this: that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It’s coming. It’s near. And Jesus’ hope was that God’s Kingdom would transform life on earth, in the here and now, bringing God’s reign of justice and peace into the everyday lives of the poor people he lived among. In the prayer Jesus taught, we ask “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s the earth that needs transformation into the way of God’s Kingdom.

The same concerns are echoed in the reading from Isaiah. In the very first verses, Isaiah accuses the leaders of Judah: “Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

Sodom and Gomorrah were evil places, but not for the reasons you might have heard. According to the prophet Ezekiel, Sodom’s sin was not about sexual violence. Rather, in Ezekiel’s words: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” If that’s the definition of Sodomy—that they had plenty of food for themselves, but didn’t share it with those in need—then who are the Sodomites of our day?

Isaiah accuses the rulers and elite in Jerusalem of behaving like the people of Sodom. They don’t try to “rescue the oppressed,” they don’t “defend the orphan” or “plead for the widow.” They try to win God’s favor by making all the proper sacrifices in the temple, but it doesn’t matter. The only way to please God is to seek justice for the poor.

Justice is at the heart of Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God. In God’s kingdom, there will be no suffering, and the resources God has given us will be shared equitably so that everyone has enough. As citizens of God’s kingdom, we live under the charity, the *caritas* of God. And as we imitate God’s lovingkindness toward us, as we are charitable toward others, our *caritas* must lead us inevitably towards justice. When we give to the poor, we move closer to them. When we

serve them, we are able to listen to them. And in their cry, we hear God's voice—and God's voice cannot help but change us, transforming our vision of what the world ought to be, and inspiring us to strive for the justice of God's kingdom.

Amen.

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