

Inequality Sermon - “ Of Cabbages and Kings”

SLIDE CABBAGE PILE

***"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax
Of cabbages and kings***

There's a lot of talk about the minimum wage lately. Some say we need to maintain some basic level of income for all. Others tell us that it's a marketplace, supply and demand, basic economics.

For example: a farmer grows cabbages. He takes his cabbages to market. if there are lots of cabbages the farmer has to lower his price but, people buy lots of cheap cabbages, the farmer sells all his cabbages and everyone goes home happy. It's a wonderful thing. Well, except, often if there are too many cabbages, and let's face it there is only so much appetite for flatulence inducing brassicas, the price is too low and the farmer says “forget this, let them rot”. Which is fine for cabbages.

SLIDE UNHAPPY CABBAGE PILE

But people are not cabbages, and when there are lots of workers, can we pay them so little it's not worth getting up in the morning. Can we just leave some to rot ? Is that OK? How do we choose who gets left behind? The uneducated? The minorities? The old? It's a moral question as well as an economic one.

We unite to strengthen the bonds of kinship among all persons;To promote human dignity....

How does our covenant with each other extend outside these walls? Do we express that in our daily life? What does a lived faith look like? John Donne lay in his sick bed and recognized that “No Man is an Island” and as our society changes, sickens, some may say, that universal connection becomes vital.

This is not an abstract philosophical discussion. You may have noticed that *Made in the USA* is a rarer and rarer label on the things we buy these days. That's OK for the country if America still designs the iPhones and services that the world needs. If we still get the lion's share of the profits then who cares where the production lines are?

Well it does change things and in a way that we need to address. Many of us are not high tech, high finance workers, and that means many of us are competing for jobs in restaurants, construction and health care. We are paid minimum wage and are struggling to survive.

Inequality is at its greatest for years. *The top 3% in the USA now own 54% of all wealth and the percentage is predicted to increase.* Thomas Picketty in his book “Capital” says that we are headed to levels of wealth and poverty that haven't been seen since the 1920s

and before. Now “**Downton Abbey**” is a great TV program - and you have to love those accents - but is it really a society we want to return to, because for sure most of us are not headed upstairs, as it were.

SLIDE DOWNTON

In the 1970s a shift began that is continuing today. Productivity increased but wages did not keep pace. We saw Reaganomics, pressure on unions, freezing of the minimum wage, tax cuts - for the rich mainly- automation, globalization. All of these started to make the rich richer and the middle class poorer.

SLIDE Income since 1970

To add to the disparity CEOs began to push for higher salaries and benefits, and convinced their boards that they really were worth the X million a year that they demanded. A new class of super rich began to emerge. The so called 1 %.

SLIDE Picketty Inequality 1910 -2010

And it's going to get worse. Picketty offers this prediction for the future: Since the return on capital will always tend to be greater than wages - he has a 2 inch thick book to back up his argument- and since capital will be increasingly needed in a high tech automated society, the divergence will increase and the rich will take more and more of the economic pie. If we do not take steps to change things.

However, let's not be too hasty to gather our pitchforks and torches and run to the castle gates of these 1%, for if we step back a bit we are the 1%. Well to be more exact if your income is over \$32,000 you are in the 1% club of a world where many people live on \$1 a day.

SLIDE THIRD WORLD TRASH PICKER

So, before we start beating up the rich, we might question why we are not giving our thousands away even if they are not giving their millions away.

But inequality is a problem and a growing one; and it affects us all. In the book ***The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*** by **Richard G. Wilkinson** and **Kate Pickett**, they show that we all suffer with inequality - rich and poor.

SLIDE example graph Social Issues

Here we plot an index of various social issues - crime-rates, health, depression, against the level of inequality in various countries. There's a direct correlation. Unequal societies are unhappier, unhealthier, more crime ridden. There are less opportunities for advancement and progress. Knowing the cards are stacked against you or being in a constant struggle to maintain what you think is yours takes a toll, personally and socially.

There nearly off the scale is the US. It's an exceptionalism we shouldn't cherish. We may still believe that we are the leaders in freedom, liberty, democracy and a clear path of advancement, but the facts say otherwise. As one expert put it ***"If you want to live the American Dream then move to Sweden."***

So if our worldview and the path of our society does not match our ideals how should we go about reversing this downward slide?

Maybe we should appeal to our government. This is the greatest democracy on earth. Isn't that the route for change?

Well that option may be slipping away. As we move towards a more Victorian social system our politics moves too. The Citizens United ruling says that Money is free speech. If I can pay for it I have more free speech. (There may be a Zen koan in there.)

We can call it the world's greatest democracy, but we might want to accept that it's starting to look more like plutocracy and oligarchy . You may be right and true but if I can pay for enough TV ads , saturate the web , and pay an army of workers to knock on doors and spread my message, how well does your rightness and enthusiasm fare in this new marketplace of ideas?

Ah, the market again. Well we can look to that. You see this is America, this is a country where if you work hard and do the right thing you will do well. So those folks who have a lot of money, they deserve it. They struggled and are smart, solid folks and if **you** are smart and work hard **you** are going to join them. We all deserve our wealth and power. No sense in being envious just because they have more. That's Just the way it is. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate. The poor are always with us...etc etc. Get over it.

I'll let another Brit give his take on this:

VIDEO John Oliver

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfgSEwjAeno>

SLIDE JOHN OLIVER STILL

This optimism, or as Chuck Collins, the author of "99 to 1. How Wealth Inequality is Wrecking the World and What We Can Do About It" calls it, this "Myth of Deservedness" , blinds us to the reality of our situation. If we look closely at the rich, we can see the true story. Many were born rich, or with successful parents that passed on the fruits of success in education, culture and social connection, as we saw with Bill Gates. The real story is often of parents, teachers, mentors, free education, protection of law, state provided infrastructure.

And yes this is often about class, but let us not be silenced by the accusation of CLASS WARFARE!!! OMG, OMG!!

SLIDE CLASS WAR

Yes, class exists. Politicians will happily talk about the middle class and how it is suffering, and they may accept that there is an “upper middle class” and a “lower middle class “ because keeping that “middle” suggests we are all still in a balanced, common, average, situation here. Except that “working class” folks earn less than \$10 an hour while “upper class” or 1% folks earn \$13K an hour, not that they ever think of it that way. We are uneasy about talking about class; it harks back to the old societies that we left behind, proclaiming our Declarations and Constitutions in a new and better land. But confidence in our own situation without true self examination is dangerous.

If we can succeed in seeing the problems we can work on solutions. Recognizing class differences, or “cultural” differences if that makes us feel more comfortable, is important. We need to challenge our own assumptions and others, and we need to be open to connect with those who do not match our personal situations, backgrounds and myths - the welfare mothers, the poor, the oppressed who came through, maybe to simply survive, and not be the usual rags to riches, Harvard CEO, success story, we want.

People can be uncomfortable with backgrounds in both poverty and privilege, and they fear that theirs is a story that society does not want to hear. However understanding how people’s circumstances and background affect their viewpoints and actions is important if we are to “strengthen the bonds of kinship “ and awareness that will support change.

And there is change ! Take a look at the news.

SLIDE WALMART NEWS

Walmart and McDonald's are increasing their minimum wages. Why? Because if you squeeze folks too much they have little to lose and they are unhappy and leave. High turnover costs business dollars.

We consumers also felt a little dirty going to stores we knew were not doing the right thing. We voted with our dollars and the market reacted to that. So our faith is lived by doing the right thing in our daily life, and we can do more. We can ask about the people who bag our groceries, cook our food and paint our nails. Ask them, ask their employers, tell our friends. Word gets around. Maybe corporations aren’t people but they can be made to feel a kind of economic shame.

States and cities like Seattle and even Chicago are recognizing that they can stand up for their own citizens and set their own minimum wage. Paying people more means less need for welfare, expensive public services and safety nets. They see that we are all a community and social responsibility is fiscal responsibility.

SLIDE CORPORATIONS ARE NOT PEOPLE

Move to Amend. This was once an easily dismissed, peripheral group, with an unattainable goal of changing the Constitution, limiting the power of money in politics. It is now a nationwide network of supporters: a Congressman here, a town or state there.

It's not an easy fight but a dialog is occurring that encourages people to think about our democracy and how we should protect it.

Tax reform is happening. There is pressure to override the ideology of the past few years that any tax is bad and that avoiding taxes is some natural, honest endeavor. Taxes are the subscription we pay for the society we live in. The roads, the law, the education, the care for the young, seniors and less able. Warren Buffett has acknowledged that when his secretary pays more tax than he does the system has gone astray. Folks like him and Bill Gates and the Patriotic Millionaires are offering to pay more because they see the bigger picture. They see that we are all suffering when the rich avoid their fair share of the burden.

As Teddy Roosevelt said:

“The man of great wealth owes a peculiar obligation to the state because he derives special advantages from the mere existence of government.”

SLIDE NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

We are all in this together. The changes in society will affect us all, the worse for our inaction. We are called as a community, here and beyond, to live out our ideals for all, in this generation and future ones. As John Donne said, after he noted that “No Man is an Island”, “Do not ask then for whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee” and for your children.... and their children.

[PAUSE]

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Sermon Closing Slide into Benediction ..Sharing The Light

Now as we extinguish our chalice, let us take some time to recognize the greater light that shines in all of us, regardless of income or background.

Please stand, turn to your neighbors and greet them. Do this with an openness to their stories, their myths, their struggles and their joys. Let us not be islands. Rather let us join to form John Donne's continent of compassion.