

**Psalm 146 – Praise God for the upside down kingdom**

**1 Timothy 6:6-19 – godliness of contentment, temptation of riches, lean on fruits of spirit  
wealth – food security – hospitality – radical hospitality – open table – communion**

I invite you into my flow of consciousness, as I consider these scripture texts that focus on wealth.

One of the commentaries I looked at said “don’t give any advice about money, it’s exhausting”.

And so I hope that what I have to say will be food for thought, rather than incentive for a nap.

Wealth is about more than money and it has led me to consider food, hospitality, the radical welcome that Jesus lived, and how the practice of communion draws us together.

**Trouble in the text - Wealth**

In this first letter of Paul to Timothy, we are told of how some of the teachers of the early church saw their position as a means to financial gain. Their eagerness to be rich is considered by Paul to have led them away from faith and in the direction of many other sins. Today’s Psalm holds a similar warning, where wickedness is equated with being self-ruled. Here, the desire to be self-sufficient, or for financial security, draws trust away from faith in God.

In Timothy, an important distinction is made that wealth in itself is not critiqued, but the desire for wealth and harmful attitudes about wealth are seen as problematic. Paul distinguishes the temporary nature of wealth from the eternal love of God.

At the time Paul was writing, wealth could really only accumulate through continuous cooperation with the Roman administration. It was only in supporting a system of broad oppression that a few could benefit. Early Christians were critical of this unethical inequality and envisioned equal distribution of wealth. There was acceptance of rich benefactors who lived out their faith in supporting the work of the early church.

The crucial message that is shared here is that with wealth comes struggle that threatens to alter our attitudes and hinder our trust in God.

**Trouble in the world – Food Security**

The inequality that early Christians saw around them continues to be a reality in the world. The chasm between the rich and the poor is immense. About 75% of North Americans

are among the richest 1% of the world's population. On a worldwide scale, an income of \$30,000 per year places you among that 1%. By another measure, if you eat more than one meal per day and have more than one set of clothes, you are among the world's rich.

We place great confidence in financial security, something that insulates us from some of life's pain. Though reality is that within our history as Mennonite people there is experience of poverty and oppression and within each of our own lives there is experience of loss and pain. Financial security cannot protect us from all of life's troubles. But there are drastic inequities between the lives of the rich and the poor.

Food security is a source of division that leads some to treat food as an overabundant luxury while others struggle constantly with finding enough for daily sustenance. Serving at Friendship Inn last week, along with a number of other volunteers from our congregation, was an eye-opening experience of the need that exists so close to home. We were taken aback by the number of children to whom we served lunch, and also by the sheer number of people that were served, nearing 1,000 plates of food in a lunchtime rush. The number of people who are hungry in our own communities are mind numbing.

Having too much insulates us from recognizing and acknowledging our interconnection with the rest of the world. When we place our trust in our own financial security, we miss out on the opportunity to commune with others, to relate to a wider community, and to depend on people around us.

### **Grace in the text - hospitality – radical hospitality**

And so in returning to 1st Timothy, we are reminded to be content with what we have. We are discouraged from the desire for riches, focusing instead on the pursuit of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. We are promised that these efforts will lay a foundation, taking hold of the life that really is life. We are being pointed in the direction of gifts that intertwine our lives with the lives of others.

In the book, "When Breath Becomes Air", Paul Kalanithi, a 30-something neurosurgeon who was months from completing his medical residency when he was diagnosed with fatal lung cancer, reflects on his Christian faith as it influences his work with patients. He sums up the

message of the New Testament with these words: “mercy always trumps justice”. This message has been steeping in my brain since the first reading. In my own life as a parent, these words have reminded me that I often define justice as the way I want things to happen. I recognize that when I succeed in putting mercy first, I am more successful in moving gently to maintain relationships, focus on long term wellbeing, act in love, and trust that ultimately a new kind of justice is being nurtured.

On a broader scale, justice has often been defined by those in power; those with the means to create the rules and write the history. The scriptures impart a different message, showing a preferential option for the poor, the assumption being that mercy will prevail and, as Psalm 146 states, God will execute justice for the oppressed and give food to the hungry. God’s activity in the world is countercultural, recognizing first the people who the world overlooks. And still, this preference that is given to the poor does not mean that the rich are rejected. God’s welcome and invitation is radically extended to everyone.

We tend to spiritualize certain texts of the Bible, sure that a strong political statement was meant as allegory. We also look to some texts and choose to interpret them as literal truth. In my own wishy-washy way, I am convinced that more often than not, biblical texts are both spiritual and physical, for I do not believe that God intends that we separate the two.

Our reading in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy is not a lesson in piety, but actually about the distribution of wealth. And it does call us to consider the cross and how suffering for others can bring us new life. We as the church are called to participate in Christ’s work in the world. While we are justified through faith in God, this does not release us from the opportunity to work in the world towards the building of God’s kin-dom.

Having wealth can open up opportunities to be a part of this work and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy recommends the development of attitudes about money that draw us towards God. We are encouraged to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, and to be ready to share. These behaviours help us to envision the gospel with God in our midst.

Paul suggests that finding contentment with what we have produces a gain in godliness. This focus on contentment has the feel of stoicism, not a lack of emotion, but the ability to

maintain calm even in the midst of a storm. Perhaps this incentive to clear away the clutter of what we create around us – our busyness and our possessions -will allow us to focus in on the importance of relationship and connection with each other and with God. As Paul suggests in verse 19, the true gift will be in taking hold of the life that really is life.

### **Grace in the world - hospitality – radical hospitality – open table – communion**

So what is the life that really is life? When we visit the Friendship Inn, there is grace that comes in recognition, in hearing stories, in connecting names to faces. We learn to not take for granted the surplus that we enjoy or the family we are born into. We are blessed to have opportunity to share food and to sit down together to share conversation. For life to really be life, hospitality must be mutual, a shared event, not just giving, but also receiving.

When we feel challenged because we don't understand or are made uncomfortable by someone's difference, let us know that in that dis-ease and dis-comfort, God is there. That discomfort is an invitation, an invitation to godliness – not godliness as we so often hear it as piety or properness, but godliness as we are taught by the example God gave us through Jesus' life on this earth. Godliness that welcomes in the stranger, accepts the outsider, celebrates those who protest, advocates for those who are used and abused.

God's provisions for us are full of grace. These are not just a financial package, but a place where our hope can safely lie. The Psalm promises that God will care for the earth better than any earthly leader, and we are all linked in that promise as WE are the hands and heart of God, the way in which God's presence is felt in the world.

We are familiar with hospitality, which seems to me a central tenant of Mennonite homes and culture. In my experience, Mennonite hospitality is delivered with conversation and with food. A warm welcome includes the opportunity to place yourself within the web of relations and friends, and to enjoy a meal that leaves you not just satisfied but over fed.

God models for us a radical hospitality that offers welcome to the stranger and outsider even before the friend and family. While we understand hospitality through sharing food, communion is a ritual that reflects the hospitality of God on a grand scale. This is hospitality that welcomes us in and invites us to accept the place that was prepared for us at the table.

In "Take This Bread", author Sarah Miles describes her work as a war reporter in Nicaragua during the 1980s revolution. She was not religious at the time she did this work, but received a profound sense of acceptance and communion with the many people who shared food with her, many of whom were hungrier than she was. She describes a continuing feeling of hunger for this connection that was only filled when she was served communion and felt an inexplicable sense of belonging. After joining the church, Miles has continued to develop programs to provide food to the poor, believing that the sacrament of communion must also be extended beyond the walls of the church in real and practical sharing of food.

Knox United Church, where we attended in Prince George, practiced an open communion table. The minister, Rob, caused a shift in my theology with his invitation to communion, a fact that he celebrates to this day. Rob says, "This is not my table, this is not the table of the United Church of Canada, this is God's table, and all are welcome here. Even if you do not believe in God, God believes in you and wishes to be in communion with you". It was in this church that Nora and Emmett began to take communion when they were old enough to become aware of what we were doing. Arriving at church and noting the prepared communion table, Nora said "oh good, we are having community today". At times our small congregation would stand in a circle around the sanctuary and serve communion to each other. Many times I was approached by individuals who were moved by having watched young ones reverently serving their neighbours. We do not need to be able to explain theologically our reasons for taking communion in order to feel drawn closer to God and community.

The sharing of communion within a community of believers does not require that we all get along or agree with and understand each other. God calls us into community because this is a place in which we can experience the life that really is life. God calls us to take part in the building of God's kin-dom on earth because it is an opportunity to start navigating the chasms between ourselves and others.

Let us go forward with the mercy that always trumps justice. Amen.