

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 13, 2016

Theme for Lent: “Plotting the Resurrection”

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 12:1-8

REFLECTION

“For their holidays: the rich go see the world; the poor go see their parents.”

“For their holidays: the rich’s kids travel the world; the poor’s kids roam around their grandparents’ yard.”

“Poor people do not go on holiday; they go home.”

— Mokokoma Mokhonoana, author, philosopher, social critic, graphic designer, b. South Africa

Class

You may have heard about *Ben and Jerry* supporting Bernie Sanders presidential campaign – and inventing an ice cream named “Bernie’s Yearning.” Proceeds go to his campaign. What I didn’t know until this week is what the ice cream actually is. It is “mint chocolate chip” – with all of the chocolate in a disk on top – representing about 1% of the container’s contents. You have to break up the disk and stir the chocolate pieces around for a more equitable distribution throughout the ice cream.

What a great metaphor. I would expect no less from an Oberlin College graduate (Jerry Greenfield class of 1973 – I entered in September that year.) It’s a metaphor that got me thinking – not just about getting some ice cream – but about the nature of the “1%” in our political conversations of late.

The reference comes from various economic sources that report that 1% of Americans own one-third to one-half of household wealth in the country. This is now a global statistic. An article in Fortune’s online magazine reported in October 2015 that:

The top 1% now owns half the world's wealth

by Daniel Bentley @djbentley OCTOBER 14, 2015, 4:20 PM EST

They begin:

Maybe Bernie has a point...

The richest 1% of the world’s population now owns 50% of its total wealth, according to a report by Credit Suisse.

Worldwide, there are 34 million people who have a U.S. dollar net worth of at least \$1 million, or 0.7% of the global adult population, and they account for 45% of global wealth. If you extend the bracket to include those with less than \$1 million, but still within the top 1%, then total wealth crosses the magic 50% line.

Within the top 1% is there is a much more elite club: the **0.36 percenters**. These are adults with a net worth of more than \$50 million, and there's just 123,800 of them in the world.

At the base of the global wealth pyramid are those with a **net worth of less than \$10,000, who account for a massive 71%** of the world's adult population.

In total, the report estimates that global households have amassed \$250 trillion (an amount equal to 100x JP Morgan's assets).

Credit Suisse says wealth inequality was actually falling before the financial crisis but has increased every year since 2008. The U.S. created 903 new millionaires between the 2014 and 2015 report, while median wealth has stagnated. Globally the number of millionaires fell, though the strength of the U.S. dollar is cited as the biggest contributing factor to that statistic.

<http://fortune.com/2015/10/14/1-percent-global-wealth-credit-suisse/>

The rest of us – now referred to as the 99% can be divided up by percentages of what's left of household wealth. For instance

Just prior to President Obama's 2014 State of the Union Address, media reported that the top wealthiest 1% possess 40% of the nation's wealth; the bottom 80% own 7%; similarly, but later, the media reported, the "richest 1 percent in the United States now own more additional income than the bottom 90 percent". **The gap between the top 10% and the middle class is over 1,000%; that increases another 1000% for the top 1%.** The average employee "needs to work more than a month to earn what the CEO earns in one hour...

In 2011, financial inequality was greater than inequality in total wealth, with the top 1% of the population owning 42.7%, the next 19% of Americans owning 50.3%, and the bottom 80% owning 7%.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wealth_inequality_in_the_United_States

So, although there are clear strata when it comes to class, the Occupy Movement – (first noticed by the press due to a protest in September 2011 on Wall Street – becoming an **international** movement within a month) – – chose to keep the 99%

grouped together – creating UNITY among the 99% - but setting up an US / THEM dichotomy against the 1%.

And it occurred to me, listening to Jerry and Ben talk ice cream – that we tend to focus on how evil the 1% of PEOPLE are to hoard wealth – rather than focus on the disk of chocolate. It is a concentration of resources that needs to be distributed – and even some of the one-percenters agree and are trying to do just that. Instead of hurling personal invectives at each other on television and Facebook we might focus on how to solve the problem of income inequality... which hurts all of us – all 100% - in one way or another.

One line from our text this morning has been used by countless people to justify the class system – dividing us from one another. In the New Revised Standard Version Jesus says, **“You always have the poor with you...”** Most versions I’ve heard use the future tense, **“You will always have the poor among you...”** Present and/or future – the idea is that our work of caring for one another, especially those less fortunate, is endless. There is no “fix” or absolute “solution” to wealth inequality.

I’ve heard this text used erroneously to justify the class system – to give up on even trying to make things more equitable. “We will always have poor people. Oh well.” Or there’s the line, “Some people were just intended to be poor...” laying this at G-d’s feet.

And then there’s the claim that some people deserve to be poor – because of what they have done or not done. “The rich are blessed by G-d for who they are.”

However, these justifications were not the point Jesus was making. Actually there are multiple points but the justification of hoarding wealth isn’t one of them. Here are a few I’ve come up with:

- There will always be unmet needs. Do what you can.
- Do your part – but don’t forget to take care of yourself and your loved ones as well.
- The work that needs to be done to level the class system is work for every generation – now and in the future.

In the 1970’s, at a peace rally my father helped to organize at Cal State University Los Angeles – Daniel Ellsberg, author of the whistle-blowing Pentagon Papers, spoke. <http://www.ellsberg.net/bio> One of the things he said has stayed with my Dad ever since. It was a remark that the work of making peace is endless. We are in this forever. In other words, the Vietnam War may end – but War Itself will recur again and again –

because of who we are as humans. There is no “fix” or absolute “solution” to our propensity for warfare. As Pete Seeger sang, “When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?” We haven’t yet.

The same goes for bigotry, misogyny, greed and bullying. These live in us – we’ve labeled them “sins” – and they miss the mark of what we believe G-d intends for us – which is the Beloved Community where these dreadful things do not hold sway. The church is one way that we humans have continued to fight these fights – promoting peace and equitable distribution of resources and equal treatment of people. And we have failed miserably – most of the time. But we keep trying. This is our social experiment – and our hope is to keep experimenting until there is a shift in culture – and there will be less suffering.

Part of what needs to shift is our language about each other. “The Poor” are not separate from us – especially as they are “with” and “among” us. In quantum physics it’s clear that we are part of each other – and when one suffers, we all suffer – one is lifted up, we are all lifted up. We have a tendency to label and distance ourselves from people we don’t want to be. Even so, they ARE us – and we ARE them. Jesus did his best to make that clear. We are the 99% - UNITED.

The problem is that the same is true for the 1%. The 1% is human. The hope is not that those humans will go away – but that the resources they are currently curating can be redistributed. Those humans are us – with different circumstances and access. They struggle with the same “sins” and desires, they suffer and wonder and try to make sense of things, to create a moral framework for what they do and who they are – just like we do – unless they are sociopaths – and then we have a different problem.

“The People” are actually “The 100%” – and we are in this together – forever.

We need to focus on the chocolate – chopping it up and stirring it around – making sure the bottom half of the container gets as much as the middle.

We are all mint chocolate chip ice cream – for better or worse.
Let’s act like it!

Children’s Time xx By xx

John 12:1-8

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 **You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.**"