



### **Profit and Community**

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 Ecumenical Avondale Worship Service at  
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I grew up Presbyterian and the two New Testament stories I remember the most are Jesus welcoming the children, and Jesus feeding the five thousand. Jesus noticing, helping, and loving the “least among us” (and we are going to come back to that idea of least) - well that seemed to me like someone to trust. Jesus filling my heart as a child hungry for love, as all children, as all humans are. Jesus letting me know, no matter what those crazy adults in my life did, I was always seen and cared for, I was safe, I was always special.

In this story the disciples say to Jesus “Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” To paraphrase what the disciples seem to have been saying, listen Jesus, this crowd needs to pull itself up by its boot straps, get a life and stop taking free handouts and acting like welfare kings and queens.

And Jesus replied to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

The story of feeding the five thousand is unusual because it appears in all four *New Testament* gospels (it is in all four of them, and not many are), and the story is very much the same in each gospel. This is a primal, basic story in the canon of Christianity and human life. We help those among us who cannot help themselves. We are sisters and brothers in an interdependent web of life. We work to build a community based on the greater good, an earth made fair and all her people one, a heaven here on earth, because a house divided amongst itself cannot stand.

Last spring I attended the Harriet Beecher Stowe lecture at the Mercantile Library. Mrs. Stowe, of course, wrote the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and simultaneously made abolition of slavery imperative in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. President Abraham Lincoln referred to her as the “little lady who started the war” [Civil War, that is]. When she and her family lived in Cincinnati, they occupied a house a ½ mile from here, a house that is still standing on Gilbert Ave. Mrs. Stowe cared more for an earth made fair, than she cared about the racial ideas of her neighbors or the money in her pocket.

I tried to read Uncle Tom's Cabin again this summer. I could not read it, again. I have never been able to read it. I can't finish it. The plight of Tom, and the ignorant and cruel people he meets, is too much for me. It was true, and it was not right. So we fought a war.

A lecture in her honor should at least attempt to meet this standard of moral and ethical thought and social action. The speaker last spring, former journalist David Simon, did not disappoint those of us who came. David Simon is the writer and producer of such shows as *The Corner*, *Homicide*, *The Wire*, and *Treme*. Gritty, realistic shows about cities, families, drugs and crime, the people caught in crime, who commit crime, who prevent crime, who should prevent crime but instead commit crime. Simon says of his work,

My work is about decline of an empire – where human beings are worth less every day. They are more boxed in and have less choices. We don't stand with our poorest most vulnerable people, those economically left behind – immigrants and minorities . . . This is the backdrop for all of my work, a country no longer in control of a viable future. It is the only thing I did not borrow or create.

According to Mr. Simon we have become a country so addicted to capitalism, to just one tool of making wealth, that we apply it to everything, including social policy, with disastrous results. Mr. Simon really got me thinking. His words spoke to me.

Do you remember the complete trashing of folks on welfare that took place, about 10-20 years ago (not that it is so much better now – but at least you get a card now, instead of all those obvious food stamps). What is with hating the poor? What is with it? It could be you and me. Maybe it is you and me. We hate what is vulnerable, human. In doing so we hate ourselves, and we hate what is holy.

Do you remember the language of “welfare queens?” “Welfare queens” were a drain on the system, lazy people taking free handouts from other hardworking people. And they were despicable because they were women; bonbon eating, Oprah watching women. The least among thee, labeled beyond capitalistic redemption.

When I think of that rhetoric and how it galvanized a nation I have this image of Jesus as the CEO saying “Take the poor from me. Their presence here lowers my housing value and distracts my attention from my portfolio. And yes, to keep them from me and everyone else, let's give them a bad name, how about “Welfare Queens.” No, Jesus said “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” He reminds me of my mother saying “You give them something to eat. You don't just walk by.”

Mr. Simon says that Americans today are more concerned with short term profit than social community. I agree. Now, Mr. Simon has nothing against capitalism. He said that it is a fine tool for making money in the short and long term – but it can't fix or manage social issues. Capitalism can't even efficiently manage itself. Mr. Simon referred to it as a casino without rules. And this casino has been running our social policy.

Invest in risky business and if the investment fails, cut employee pensions or health care. But we don't have that sort of leeway or forgiveness for home foreclosures, the unemployed, individuals who have a criminal record by have served their time and reformed. Capitalism, at least in the form

we practice it now, does not value all humanity, all community. It does not consider citizenship. It does not consider all her people one.

Mr. Simon notes that capitalism has had a hand in destroying banking, journalism, and the environment (I would add the middle class, working class, and poor as well). He explains that we have de-industrialized our cities, they lack jobs and transportation, but there is one place that is hiring, drugs and crime on the corner (explain corner). As Mr. Simon says “The corner will destroy them, but the corner needs them and is hiring – it will destroy them and the community . . . the drug war has become a war on the poor.” So is the immigration war.

Even in Eastgate there is a “corner” in my neighborhood. (There was one where I lived in Oakley too). That corner is hiring, and to all the kids on the street, that looks glamorous. Not at all like my “boring” neighbor and his wife who work the night shift cleaning local schools.

I can’t imagine that this is God’s idea of an earth made fair and all her people one. It’s not mine. I am going to my grave saying “This is not my idea.”

So then I had this brainstorm.

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” We have nothing here but some Unitarians, Non-denominational and Baptists folks. Well. Well bring them here to me.

This is the word of God; bring them here to me in God’s house. Bring them here to me. Bless what we have. Break it to share with one another and all will eat and all will be filled, even the “least” among us.

And as to least. . . .

If we are made in God’s image, who is least among us? Who here is not worthy? There are none truly least among us. There is our human ignorance and prejudice that sees so, but it is not real sight. Everyone is special. Everyone is important. There are no throw away humans. Our social policy should not be laissez-faire with humanity.

Martin Luther King Jr says that there is a penumbra of mystery around God. I think that penumbra must be God’s love. It must be God’s love. It is bigger than our love, bigger than capitalism as social policy.

So God calls to us. Samuel. Samuel. Why do so many of our children have a hard time reading? Samuel. Samuel. Why do former felons not have equal access to employment after they have served their time and reformed? Samuel. Samuel. Why are our neighbors in Avondale, so many of them so dispirited and poor?

Friends, I hope you have been hearing the call. I hope you did not come because the pastor twisted your arm. OR maybe that was call – you didn’t hear me the first two times so the pastor made it hurt! I hope you came because you believe that we are stronger together than we are alone. I hope you came because you heard your neighbors, regardless of faith, shared many of the same concerns for humanity as you do.

The Avondale Clergy, which brought us here today, is working on employment rights for former felons. We are offering prayer and outreach teams to residents. At my church we have partnerships to tutor Avondale high school and kindergarten students. I hope this morning you heard the call and will find out from your pastor or social justice committee how to get involved. The first Saturday of every month from 6PM – 8PM meet at the Avondale Towne Center to walk on an outreach team, or go to St. Michaels to be on a prayer team. On Fridays at 6:30 head to the House of Joy in College Hill for a multi-media hip hop extravaganza that joins teenagers with Jesus and God.

I am left with the unsettled notion that we are the disciples. Yes, I know, frightening. It is up to us to spread the good news of God's love in a country that has gone capitalist crazy. It is up to us feed the five thousand. It is up to us to celebrate, not neglect the least among us. The person you save may be yourself . . . It is up to us to get creative with the five fish and two loaves. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." God is calling us together. We can only feed together. And I do not personally care if you pray to Allah, Jesus, Yahweh, Siva, God, or no one, if you give them something to eat, you are spreading the good news of God's love. You are an agent for the earth made fair and all her people one. You have heard the call.

EARTH SHALL BE FAIR, AND ALL HER PEOPLE ONE

May it always be so.