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Worker Justice Matters

A Study Guide for Congregations and Students

Interfaith



Worker Justice

Unit

1

Unemployment: From Rat Race to God's Grace

Introduction:

With the unemployment rate soaring, the internet is laden with tragic stories of the unemployed such as the following:

I have been an Electrician for over 17 years. I raised my daughter on my earnings, instead of welfare. I have not worked in over 3 years. It's horrible [being unemployed.] I bought a place 2 1/2 years ago – my own place for the first time ever. In November of this year, I lost my place and everything I had. I had to sell my furniture to pay bills. I moved in with my mom who has paid my bills for 2 months. She can't afford it any more. She is on Social Security. I can't even get an \$8 job. I am "overqualified". I just want a job! Yes, I am used to making good money, but I went on unemployment and used that all up; I have no income coming in. I will take any job – it's better than \$0 an hour. At times, I don't care if I live or die; it doesn't matter to me. The only thing that keeps me going is my daughter, and very special granddaughter, and my animals. I would be living on the streets if it wasn't for my mom.¹

Prayers are definitely called for, but as Christians, is there anything more we can do?

Opening Questions: Are you or anyone you know unemployed? How do you or they deal with this national crisis? As Christians, how should we approach this issue? Why do you think this is happening to our economy today?

Delving into the Bible:**John 5:1-18 (CEB)**

¹After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethsaida. It had five covered porches, ³and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there.^[a]⁵A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

⁷The sick man answered him, "Sir,^[b] I don't have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I'm trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me."

⁸Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."⁹Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

¹⁰The Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It's the Sabbath; you aren't allowed to carry your mat."

¹¹He answered, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

¹ <http://jobsearch.about.com/u/sty/unemployment/unemployedstory/I-Would-Take-Any-Job.htm>

¹²They inquired, "Who is this man who said to you, 'Pick it up and walk?'" ¹³The man who had been cured didn't know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away from the crowd gathered there.

¹⁴Later Jesus found him in the temple and said, "See! You have been made well. Don't sin any more in case something worse happens to you."¹⁵The man went and proclaimed to the Jewish leaders that Jesus was the man who had made him well.

¹⁶As a result, the Jewish leaders were harassing Jesus, since he had done these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷Jesus replied, "My Father is still working and I am working too."¹⁸For this reason the Jewish leaders wanted even more to kill him – not only because he was doing away with the Sabbath but also because he called God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Look closely at vv. 1-7. In what ways is this story a microcosm of our world today as it relates to unemployment? Draw some parallels between the people who are waiting for the pool to stir, the pool itself, and the man who's been sick for 38 years with some modern day characters and places.
2. What kind of mindset or ideology are the people in vv. 1-7 operating with? What kind of mindset or ideology are the Jewish leaders operating with when they stop the man from carrying his mat in vv. 10-12? How is this kind of thinking prevalent in our society?
3. How do you think the man who had been sick for 38 year is feeling? Can you relate to what he's feeling? How and why?
4. Other than the physical aspect of healing, what else do you think Jesus has restored in the man who had been sick for 38 years? Have you experienced something like this in your own life?
5. In v. 17, Jesus says, "My Father is still working and I am working too." What kind of work does Jesus do and what does that indicate about the kind of work we need to do as followers of Christ?

Bible Reflection:

John 5:1-18 is a microcosm of our world that we live in. There are all these sick people lying around, trying to jump into the pool of Bethesda because they believed that the water was stirred by an angel and when that happened, sick people could jump in and get well. Bethesda means "house of grace." All the sick and broken people are waiting to receive grace at this place, but instead, they find the rat race well in progress at the pool of Bethesda.

Indeed, this is our world. Those who are capable can jump right in and seemingly receive more "grace" (i.e. money, happiness, blessings, etc.); those who are slow or without the right connections must wait around forever. Occupy Wall Street is an outcry against such oppressive structure of our society where rich get richer and poor get poorer. OWS is a movement that sprang out of a desperate desire for a new system, new ideology where people don't have to run the rat race anymore but live as valuable human beings with dignity and confidence as they experience the healing touch of true grace.

One of such people waiting by this magical pool was a man who had been an invalid for the last 38 years. Over the years, he might have grown disillusioned and complacent. But interestingly, Jesus sought him out and healed him. This healing doesn't only involve the physical aspect; Jesus healed him and let him carry his own mat. Jesus validated him and restored his dignity by putting him to "work."

As Christians, we are called to restore people's dignity and validate their worth in the face of joblessness. People are searching for a different paradigm than the rat race they had been running for so long. As people of faith, we need to contribute in "putting them to work" (i.e. "carrying his mat"). All of us have received God's grace, and we refuse to live in a society where we are forced to run the rat race; anyone who is able and willing should be able to carry their own mat with dignity and confidence. How can the church help to shift the paradigm of the rat race to God's grace?

Information and Statistics:

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, The national unemployment rate sits at about 9 percent in the US. This means that about 13.3 million people are without jobs. However, the 9 percent does not take into consideration those who have stopped looking for work, or those who are forced to work part-time jobs because there aren't any full-time positions available. The real number for both the unemployed and underemployed in the US is pushing 25 percent. In other words, 1 in 4 Americans are either unemployed or grossly underemployed.²

Questions to Consider: What do you think is the root cause of our high unemployment rate? How can the faith community work together to give jobs back to the people?

Activities for the Week:

1. What is the unemployment rate in your town? In your church?
2. Watch the 30 minute CBS Special, *Unemployment: How Faith Communities Help Job Seekers* at the following You Tube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swhHmvxrmRI>. Have a discussion about this at your church.
3. The church has been called to be a witness and presence in our respective communities. What is your church doing to help the unemployed recover their dignity? Has your church considered starting a Jobs Club? Has your church considered inviting and sharing meals with the unemployed in your neighborhood? Discuss various things you can do as a church for the unemployed in your neighborhood.
4. Has your church joined the Faith Advocates for Jobs Campaign? Check out the campaign and share it with your church by visiting following link: <http://www.iwj.org/network/faith-advocates-for-jobs>

Contemporary Reflection:

By Melissa Snarr

In a large classroom in the basement of a Chicago convent, about forty college and seminary students gathered to hear an interfaith panel on worker justice organizing...In an animated style, a young local rabbi leapt up to begin his presentation. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work.' (Exod. 20:8-9. TaNaK). Yes, the Sabbath is holy and sacred unto God. But God commands us to work." He continued by declaring that the passage spoke to the sacred requirement to work as well as to God's work during the six days of creation. Work is something God participates in, as something that is under the purview of God's commands. Ultimately, the rabbi argued, work was not to be seen as "divine punishment" but as part of the holistic nature of God and of human flourishing. In this context, the cause of worker justice finds its deepest grounding and accountability. After a thoughtful pause, the rabbi closed with the questions, "What does your tradition teach about work? How must we honor work? What will you teach about work?"

Reflection Question: How do you think our churches can teach the importance of work to our young people within the context of God's grace and Sabbath?

² <http://www.thenewamerican.com/economy/commentary-mainmenu-43/9508-what-is-the-real-unemployment-rate>

Unit

2

Minimum Wage: From Scarcity to Abundance

Introduction:

Melissa Snarr's introduction to her latest book, *All You That Labor*, starts out with this story:

At a southern university rally for living wages in 2005, a middle aged African American woman rose to introduce herself and speak to the crowd. Standing there in her uniform, she stated her name and job title (custodian), then paused before saying slowly and deliberately, "Everyone keeps telling me not to speak today. They say I'll lose my job or not get my raises. But I'm telling you today that I'm not afraid. There's nothing they can do to me, with God on my side." In front of a hundred students, faculty, and other staff, she relayed her story of working two jobs, one of them full time, to feed her daughter and take care of an aging mother. She expressed her frustration at not having enough time with her family, with her seemingly ceaseless work. With strength and clarity in her voice, she ended by stating her hope for "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work."

Opening Question: Have you thought about what a fair day's wage for a fair day's work might be? As you read today's passage, try to imagine how the above working class woman must have felt.

Delving into the Bible:**Matthew 20 (CEB)**

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.' And they went.

Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?'

'Because nobody has hired us,' they replied.

He responded, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.' When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?' So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last."

Discussion Questions:

1. Laborers who had come early to the vineyard and worked the most but got paid the same amount as everyone else might have felt unfairly treated and somewhat cheated although they had received the amount they were promised. Why do you think that was?
2. If you were one of the last ones to come and work, what would have been your reaction?
3. Which group do you resonate the most and why? Have you ever felt like either one of them? Please share your thoughts and experiences with the group.
4. What kind of conclusion can you draw regarding minimum wage when you read and reflect on this passage?

Bible Reflection:

In this story, the workers who were called to work in the vineyard were all day laborers. This kind of work was pretty common back then. Have you ever seen people in the city, waiting to be picked up by people who might need help for odd jobs such as moving or some sort of labor requiring a lot of manpower? Well, the picture of people waiting out in the market place to work in the vineyard is similar to this. You can imagine what the people must have felt as others were picked up but they weren't. It meant going home empty handed – it meant going home to hungry children and spouse. Finally, at the very last hour of the work day, they are picked up to go and work in the vineyard. They would have been grateful just to receive the very minimum for their work because after all, they only worked for an hour. However, they all end up receiving the same amount as the ones who came to work early and different hours of the day! They all receive a living wage. A wage they can take home and have enough to feed their children – a wage they can take home and have enough to buy clothes and pay the rent. Enough to live on, enough to dream on, enough to labor for, enough to provide for them and their family! Jesus believed not in minimum wage, but a "living wage." Indeed in God's kingdom, there is no minimum wage – only abundance. As we strive to live out God's kingdom and kingdom values, let us restore people's dignity and pay them enough for their labor so that they can lead lives of decency and abundance.

Information and Statistics:

Minimum wages are set both nationally and statewide. The minimum wage gives employers a guideline as to the legal minimum amount paid to employees. In 1968 the minimum wage served to keep 86 percent of workers and their families above the poverty line for a family of four. Today that percentage has dropped to 64 percent, in effect leaving 36 percent of wage earners living at or below the poverty line. The current minimum wage amounts are roughly half of what the projected living wage is in any given area. Living wage is defined as the estimated amount of income necessary to live comfortably and put a family into the bracket of middle class.

(<http://lafenty.hubpages.com/hub/Minimum-Wage-VS-Living-Wage>)

Questions to Consider: *As Christians, do you think we should advocate for living wage? If so, what do you think you can do to advocate for living wage in your own state?*

Activities for the Week:

1. Investigate the cost of living in your area. What would be a “living wage?” How does this compare with your state’s minimum wage? How have religious communities in your area been involved in advocating for adequate wages for all workers? Make a list of all the things you and your church can do to get involved with or start up the “living wage” campaign in your area.
2. Play the game of SPENT (www.Playspent.org) and share your reflections the next time you meet with your group. Be ready to share your reflections with your Bible study group next week.
3. If you are living mostly under the assumption of scarcity, what steps might you begin taking to open you to the experience of abundance? If you are living mostly under the assumption of abundance, what has led you to this place?

Contemporary Reflection:

By Parker Palmer From *40 Day Journey with Parker Palmer*

Most people seem to assume that scarcity is a simple fact of life. How else can one explain the obsession with acquiring, consuming, and hoarding which permeates our society? We live in constant fear of the future – the fear that money will run out, that food supplies will dwindle, that housing will be unavailable. And as we act on those fears, the assumption becomes reality! As we consume more than we need, as we hoard against the future, then stores do dwindle and prices do rise and there will be too little to go around.

The tragic victims of this self-fulfilling prophecy are, of course, the “have nots” of this world who lack the capital to act out their economic fears. For them, scarcity is no assumption at all: It is a hard and cruel fact of life. But that fact is created by people who have a choice – the choice to assume scarcity and grab for all one can get, or the choice to assume abundance and to live in such a way as to create and share it. For these people, for those of us who are affluent and educated – the matter of choosing assumptions is more than academic. Our souls and the lives of others hang in the balance.

Reflection Question: Examine your attitudes and actions. Do they reflect someone who assumes scarcity or abundance? Explain.

Unit

3 Wage Theft: From Stealing to Defending Workers’ Rights

Introduction:

According to Kim Bobo’s book, *Wage Theft in America*, “billions of dollars in wages are being illegally stolen from millions of workers each and every year... Wage theft is when an employer violates the law and deprives a worker of legally mandated wages.” (Bobo 6-7) The following story is an example of employers committing wage theft:

Paul Strauss, a Chicago labor lawyer, tells the story of an asparagus packing house owner in California. During the growing season, workers often worked seven days a week. In order to avoid overtime, the employer required workers to bring him another person’s name and social security number. Then the employer would pay the one worker under two names, thus ensuring, or so he hoped, that workers would not get overtime pay. On payday, workers would each collect two different paychecks. When Strauss helped the workers file suit, the employer quickly settled for \$60,000 in back wages. (Bobo 28)

Opening Questions: What do you know about wage theft? Have you ever experienced something similar in your own life? Share about the time when you felt like you did not receive (or pay) a fair wage for your (employee’s) work. How did you feel?

Delving into the Bible:

Exodus 24:1-15 (NRSV)

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

Jeremiah 22:1-5, 11-17 (CEB)

¹The LORD proclaims: Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and declare this message: ²Listen to the LORD’s word, king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne – you and your attendants, and all those who go through these gates. ³The LORD proclaims: Do what is just and right; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don’t exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow. Don’t spill the blood of the innocent in this place. ⁴If you obey this command, then through the gates of this palace will come kings who occupy the throne of David, riding on chariots and horses along with their entourage and subjects. ⁵But if you ignore these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this palace will become a ruin.

¹¹This is what the LORD says about Shallum son of Judah’s King Josiah, who succeeded his father Josiah as king but who is now gone from this place: He will never return! ¹²He will die where he’s been exiled and never see this land again. ¹³How terrible for Shallum, who builds his house with corruption and his upper chambers with injustice, working his countrymen for nothing, refusing to give them their wages. ¹⁴He says, “I’ll build myself a grand palace, with

huge upper chambers, ornate windows, cedar paneling, and rich red decor.”¹⁵ Is this what makes you a king, having more cedar than anyone else? Didn’t your father eat and drink and still do what was just and right? Then it went well for him!¹⁶ He defended the rights of the poor and needy; then it went well. Isn’t that what it means to know me? declares the LORD.¹⁷ But you set your eyes and heart on nothing but unjust gain; you spill the blood of the innocent; you practice cruelty; you oppress your subjects.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the Exodus passage, God’s people are not to discriminate in paying the rightful share of workers’ wages between an Israelite and an immigrant or foreigner. Do you see such discrimination happening in our society?
2. What pops into your mind when you think about acting just and righteous? In Jeremiah 22:1-5, it gives a definition for “doing what is just and right.” What is it (v. 3)? How do you think your faith community is doing this?
3. Jeremiah 22:13 says, “How terrible for Shallum, who builds his house with corruption and his upper chambers with injustice, working his countrymen for nothing, refusing to give them their wages.” That’s a pretty harsh thing to say! Reading on to verse 14, what kind of mindset do you think God is condemning in these verses? What are the consequences of this kind of thinking in our society? Do you think today’s church’s mindset is radically different from these verses?
4. According to Jeremiah 22:16b, God says, “is not this to know me?” What does it mean to know God? Based on this, would you say you know God?
5. What evil practices counter the just and righteous acts according to Jeremiah 22:17? How do you think these acts are carried out in our modern day society?

Bible Reflection:

In the Jeremiah passage, Jeremiah starts out by addressing the wicked king of Israel, Jehoiakim (608-597 BCE) who served for eleven years. He was open to idol worship and was boldly defiant of God. Jeremiah warns him by mentioning his father, Shallum (v. 11 – better known as Jehoahaz, his royal name, who ruled for three months in 608 BCE before he was taken to Egypt.) Apparently, during those three months, he oppressed his people. He was so unlike the king before him, King Josiah (639-608 BCE – father to Shallum and grandfather to Jehoiakim), who was a good and righteous king. God speaks very highly of Josiah by saying that he “knew” God. For doing what? “He defended the rights of the poor and needy” (v. 16). We tend to think that being a good Christian usually means we pray and read the Bible. If we go to church and pay our due, we think we are somewhat being just and righteous. However, according to Exodus 11:3 and Jeremiah 22:16, God tells us that justice and righteousness are defined by how we treat foreign laborers and how we defend the rights of the poor and the needy; justice and righteousness are dependent on how we pay our workers. It is particularly important that Exodus is addressing God’s people and Jeremiah is addressing the king. Certainly, God is calling the faith leaders to enact justice on behalf of the foreigners, poor, and needy. Can we rise up to the challenge and answer to the call?

Information and Statistics:

Wage theft is widespread and pervasive across all types of companies. Various surveys have found that:

- 60 percent of nursing homes stole workers’ wages.
- 89 percent of nonmonitored garment factories in Los Angeles and 67% of nonmonitored garment factories in New York City stole workers’ wages.
- 25 percent of tomato producers, 35 percent of lettuce producers, 51 percent of cucumber producers, 58 percent of onion producers, and 62 percent of garlic producers hiring farm workers stole workers’ wages.
- 78 percent of restaurants in New Orleans stole workers’ wages.
- Almost half of day laborers, who tend to focus on construction work, have had their wages stolen.
- 100 percent of poultry plants steal workers’ wages.

Although some of the worst wage theft occurs when immigrant workers aren’t paid minimum wage or aren’t paid at all, the largest dollar amounts are stolen from native-born white and black workers in unpaid overtime. (From Kim Bobo’s *Wage Theft in America*)

Questions to Consider: What is most surprising about the above statistics? Why? How does it affirm what you already know and how does it counter what you thought you knew? Do you think Christians and churches need to get involved in the issue of wage theft? If so, what are some of the ways you and your church can get involved?

Activities for the Week:

1. Watch a short clip of the documentary, *Made in LA*. This can be found on YouTube at following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfxDvbZPMUo>. (About 8 min. long)
2. Engage in conversations about wage theft with those around you. What are their thoughts on this issue? Be prepared to discuss your findings with your small group the next time you come together.
3. Where is the closest worker center from where you live? If you can, visit or call the worker center and see how wage theft is being addressed in your area and if there’s

anything for the church to do to help.

Contemporary Reflection:

By **Richard Stearns** (President of World Vision) from *A Hole in the Gospel*

When my friend Jim Wallis was a seminary student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School outside of Chicago, he and some of his classmates did a little experiment. They went through all sixty-six books of the Bible and underlined every passage and verse that dealt with poverty, wealth, justice, and oppression. Then one of Jim's fellow students took a pair of scissors and physically cut every one of those verses out of the Bible. The result was a volume in tatters that barely held together; so central were these themes to Scripture that the resulting Bible was in shambles. Jim's Bible was literally full of holes. So how can our gospel have a hole in it?

More and more, our view of the gospel has been narrowed to a simple transaction, marked by checking a box on a bingo card at some prayer breakfast, registering a decision for Christ, or coming forward during an altar call. It [isn't] as important that they [are] poor or hungry or persecuted, or perhaps rich, greedy, and arrogant; we just had to get them to pray the "sinner's prayer" and then move on to the next potential convert. We seem to have boiled down [the gospel] to a kind of "fire insurance" that one can buy. Then, once the policy is in effect, the sinner can go back to whatever life he was living – of wealth and success, or of poverty and suffering. There is a real problem with this limited view of the kingdom of God; it is not the whole gospel. Instead, it's a gospel with a gaping hole.

Reflection Questions: How is addressing the issue of wage theft related to acting on the whole gospel rather than a gospel with holes? What will your church do to eliminate the holes in the gospel when it comes to the issue of wage theft?

Unit

4

Paid Sick Time: From Degradation to Dignity

Introduction:

Respecting the health and dignity of all human beings is a core Christian value. This includes not just access to health care but time away from work to recuperate from illness as well as to tend to family members. Yet, one half of American workers in the private sector cannot take a sick day without losing a day's pay or even possibly their job.¹ Here's Desiree's story:

All three of my children were sick this fall, so in all, I missed about two weeks of work to care for my kids. I get no sick pay, so my paycheck for that period was almost nothing. That caused tremendous hardship for my family. My husband and I live paycheck-to-paycheck right now. We have no choice. We are trying to pay down debts and make our family financially stable, but it's a hard road. And it's made harder because whenever we get sick or our children get sick, we have to decide whether to stay home without pay, or to disregard doctor's orders and risk getting sicker and infecting others by going to work or school.²

Opening Questions: Can you sympathize with Desiree? Were you ever in a position where you had to choose between work and your sick children? Share stories of how not having paid sick days affected you or those you know.

Delving into the Bible:

Luke 7:1-10 (CEB)

¹After Jesus finished presenting all his words among the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion had a servant who was very important to him, but the servant was ill and about to die. ³When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they earnestly pleaded with Jesus. "He deserves to have you do this for him," they said. ⁵"He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us."

⁶Jesus went with them. He had almost reached the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't be bothered. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. ⁸I'm also a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and the servant does it."

⁹When Jesus heard these words, he was impressed with the centurion. He turned to the crowd following him and said, "I tell you, even in Israel I haven't found faith like this." ¹⁰When the centurion's friends returned to his house, they found the servant restored to health.

Discussion Questions:

1. Closely examine the centurion's character in this story by what he says, how he acts, and what others say about him. How does he embody the characteristics of a good boss?

¹ <http://iwj.org/doc/Study%20Guide%20PSD%20for%20Making%20Cxns%2005-08.pdf>

² http://www.momsrising.org/issues_and_resources/paid-sick-days-all

2. What does this tell you about what kind of servant he was? What kind of loss would your company incur if you were to fall ill? Does your company recognize you and treat you as a dignified person rather than whose value is solely defined by the amount of money you can bring in for the company?
3. Look at all the people who are involved in the healing of this centurion's servant: Jewish elders, Roman centurion, and centurion's friends. What does this indicate about their attitude toward the centurion and the servant?
4. What does a "just workplace" mean to you? How does this centurion characterize a "just workplace?"

Bible Reflection:

This is a fascinating narrative about the least unlikely people coming together to heal a mere servant. Centurion was a captain of a Roman army. He was an important man but nonetheless, a foreigner. Yet, he had such a great relationship with the Jewish people that the Jewish elders went to Jesus on his behalf to heal his servant. And centurion's friends also acted as messengers to Jesus when the servant died. It almost looks like a big family coming together for the well-being of this one servant. The narrative seems to suggest that during the time when servants were merely looked upon as property, this centurion's servant was being treated as a member of a family – a family that crossed class boundaries and social status of the time. Whether it was for the sake of the centurion or the servant himself, the Jewish elders and friends all recognized the value of this servant's well-being. Forget paid sick pay – they were genuinely concerned about the healing of this servant! Imagine how wonderful it would be if people came before work in our workplaces; imagine working in a place where we are valued for our humanity over productivity; imagine being recognized for the unique contributions we make to the company rather than being treated as disposable and replaceable machines. In an environment where there is mutual respect for human dignity, productivity and creativity will certainly flourish. To consider people disposable when they temporarily cease to be productive due to an illness is to rob workers' dignity and mercilessly exploit their humanity. As people of faith we must fight against such injustices in our workplaces.

Information and Statistics:

- Nearly one half of American workers in the private sector (fifty-seven million workers) cannot take a sick day without losing a day's pay, or even possibly their job. Nearly 100 million hard-working Americans cannot take time off to care for a sick child or elderly parent.
- Within the tens of millions of workers without paid sick time, two groups are particularly affected. Less than one quarter of low-wage workers have paid sick time (PST), although they are the workers who can least afford to lose a day's pay, and whose jobs often require contact with the public or its food supply. In fact, 78 percent of food and public accommodation workers don't have any paid sick time.
- According to the Urban Institute, 41 percent of working parents below 200 percent of the federal poverty line have no paid leave of any kind.
- Businesses that offer paid sick time see reduced turnover, higher productivity, and reduced spread of illness among workers. In fact, the American Productivity Audit found that "presenteeism" – the practice of employees coming to work despite illness – costs \$180 billion annually in lost productivity.³

Question to Consider: As a church, what do you think are some of things that can be done in order to counter the above statistics regarding paid sick time?

Activities for the Week:

1. Find out your state's paid sick leave policy. The following site might be a good place to start your research: <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/benefits-leave/sickleave.htm>
2. Follow this YouTube link and watch "Denver Contagion: Not Just a Movie" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t21IPM19HkA>. (About 6 min. long)
3. Engage in conversations about paid sick days with those around you. What are their thoughts on this issue? Be prepared to discuss your findings with your small group when you come together next time.
4. *The Healthy Families Act* was introduced in Congress in March 2007. The Act would grant seven sick days to workers to care for themselves or a family member. It would apply to firms with 15 or more workers. Urge your senators and congressperson to cosponsor *The Healthy Families Act* by calling their office and explaining how every worker needs time off to care for themselves or a family member when they are sick.
5. Sign the petition to support paid sick days for tens of millions of U.S. workers. See www.paid sick days.org to sign on.

Contemporary Reflection:

Consider the moral behind this news story from Fayobserver.com on Sept. 04, 2011:

Because a food server with an illness couldn't take time off without losing a job, thousands of North Carolinians were exposed to hepatitis. Yet nearly half of North Carolina's workers – 1.6 million people, including the Olive Garden worker at the center of this story – lack access to even one paid sick day.

Because a single food server with an illness couldn't take time off without losing a job, nearly 3,000 people in the Fayetteville area had to be vaccinated at the behest of county health officials.

When workers are forced to prepare food while sick, we risk this kind of public health crisis. That's one reason workers need access to paid sick days.

Another reason is economic. The verdict is in: when workers don't have access to sick leave, everyone suffers. Businesses lose money, workers lose income and the public loses out on safe food.⁴

Reflection Questions: There is a very strong connection between income and paid sick days: those earning the least are also least likely to have paid sick days like the restaurant worker in the above story. Is this right? Should only people earning a certain amount of money have paid sick days? What are the consequences of not having paid sick days for low wage earners?

3 <http://www.iwj.org/issues/paid-sick-days>

4 <http://fayobserver.com/articles/2011/09/04/1119575>

Unit

5

Personal Responsibility: From Stranger to Neighbor

Introduction:

Once upon a time there was a little town in the mountains called Swisstown. One day, rocks started falling from the top of the mountain, injuring many villagers. Rocks continued to fall every day, seriously injuring more and more villagers. A couple of villagers snuck up to the top of the mountain to discover that Harrison the millionaire and his friends were throwing the rocks down. They were hoping to build a luxurious hotel and golf course in Swisstown. They were throwing the rocks hoping to get rid of the villagers so they could take over the land. Meanwhile in Swisstown, all abled-body villagers quickly became involved in the rescue and relief efforts of their fellow injured villagers.

Three months later, at a town meeting, a group of villagers got together to make a proposal. They were sick and tired of the falling rocks, of their people getting hurt, and they wanted to change the situation. They proposed that the villagers unite and go up the mountain to demand that Harrison the millionaire and his friends stop throwing the rocks. Some disagreed, saying that Swisstown's rescue and relief efforts couldn't afford it. If anyone left, there wouldn't be enough people power to rescue and tend to the injured.

The town was split in two groups – those who wanted to stay and keep up the rescue effort going, and those who wanted to march up the mountain and confront Harrison the millionaire and his friends¹.

We, as people of faith who live in the real world “Swisstown” and constantly encounter people who are injured by falling rocks, must do both: be involved in the rescue and relief efforts *and* go confront Harrison the millionaire and his friends. First, let's discuss what it means to take personal responsibility on behalf of all those affected by the raining rocks.

Opening Questions: Examine our lifestyles and work habits. How have we contributed to injuring some villagers by throwing down rocks for our own profit? What has the church done to care for our wounded villagers?

Delving into the Bible:**Luke 10:25-37 (CEB)**

²⁵ A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?”

²⁶ Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?”

²⁷ He responded, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”^[a]

²⁸ Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. ³¹ Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³² Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³³ A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ ³⁶ What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”

³⁷ Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Within the context of economic justice, who would you say is your neighbor? Who are the ones in your community that have been “injured” by today's economic downturn? How are you changing your lifestyle in order to accommodate your injured neighbors?
2. How have you avoided helping the “injured” people in your life? What might have been the reason why the priest or the Levite did not help the injured man? What is your rationale in not helping those who are “injured?”
3. What does it mean to show compassion in your personal life?

Bible Reflection:

The story of the Good Samaritan is very familiar to all of us. While the priest and the Levite (modern day pastor and church lay leader) refused to help the man who had been assaulted by thieves, a Samaritan (i.e., social misfit) was “moved by compassion” (v. 33) and helped the injured man above and beyond what was ever expected of him. He took care of the man with the resources he had (bandages, oil, and wine), and sought out a place where he could further be taken care of and took him there, paying for it with his own money. Jesus says this is what it means to love your neighbor. When you see someone in need – whether that be your worst enemy or greatest friend – you don't expect the higher authorities to take care of him; you don't dump the responsibility on someone else, but you do whatever you can, using your own resources. Why? Because you are “moved by compassion.” This is where love and compassion intersect. Compassion is the boot that gets love going. Too many times, we think dropping some spare change into the charity bucket fulfills our duty toward our injured neighbors. We think we can go on living extravagant lives and claim that we have loved our neighbors because we've given our leftovers to them. However, through the Good Samaritan, we are reminded once again that love isn't cheap. It costs our time, effort, and even money. We don't give whatever scrap that is left over – loving others is intentional, costly, and hands-on. Our acts of love naturally flow out of allowing our hearts to be moved by compassion time and again. Do our daily habits and lifestyle reflect such acts of costly love? Do we take personal responsibility for the injustices we see in our paths?

¹ Adapted from “Raining Rocks Story”: A Parable http://cchealth.org/groups/tobacco_project/pdf/08_community_organizing.pdf

Information and Statistics:

In 2010, chief executives at some of the nation's largest companies earned an average of \$11.4 million in total pay – 343 times more than a typical American worker, according to the AFL-CIO.²

Question to consider: What is disturbing about the above figures? What do those figures indicate about our current state of economic justice in America?

Activities for the Week:

1. Watch a YouTube excerpt from *The American Ruling Class*, a dramatic-documentary-musical. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDgFiW2xtf0>. (About 10 min. long)
2. Engage in conversations about the documentary with those around you. What are their thoughts on this issue? Be prepared to discuss your findings with your small group the next time you come together.
3. Contact your state representative about issues of economic justice that concerns you the most (wage theft, living wage, paid sick days, etc.) It is best to call them. However, if you want to send letters, it's usually best to send them to the representative from your local Congressional District or the senators from your state. Also, a personalized letter will grab their attention more than a cookie-cutter letter.
4. Share with your group one or more ways of how you will alter your lifestyle to care for your "injured" neighbors. Create a commitment card you could place in a visible place.

Contemporary Reflection:

By **Rebecca M. Blank** from *Do Justice: Linking Christian Faith and Modern Economic Life*

The word "economics" is derived from the Greek word, *oikonomos*, which is the combination of two words. *Oikos* means household and *nomos* is the word, or the law. *Oikonomos*, or economics, can therefore be interpreted as "the law or the management of the household."

The imagery of the household is a familiar one for Christians, for it is present throughout the Bible. The word "household" appears in both the Old and New Testament. Its most familiar use to Christians may be in the steward parables of Jesus, where Jesus tells of stewards who mismanage their household and bring forth the judgment of their master. In the Old Testament the "household" that is referred to is typically the household of Israel. But in the New Testament, the "household" is vastly expanded to include all people. The neighbor becomes not just the one next door, but the one in need, whatever his or her ethnic background. Even the Samaritan (the Russian, the Iraqi) is a neighbor to those who follow Christ. It is this uncomfortably inclusive household of God that we are called to manage.

² http://money.cnn.com/2011/04/19/news/economy/ceo_pay/index.htm

As Christians, we are called to provide life to all within our household. Thus, for the Christian, economics can be defined as the management of God's household so that all may have life. Managing God's household so that all receive life implicitly emphasizes the need to care particularly for the well-being of the poor. The Bible again and again points out God's special concern and care for the poor. In making economic decisions, it is those whose livelihood is most threatened for whom we should be most concerned. Thus, our economic decisions must always involve the question "What will this do for the poor among us?" Policies that limit the access of individuals and groups to the resources and opportunities of the larger household/economy are a mismanagement of God's economy and are unjust. Indeed, the most effective way of "seeing" economic injustice in our world is to observe the world through the eyes of those who have been excluded from the economic abundance received by middle and upper-income Americans.

Reflection Questions: As a Christian, how can you be involved in this "management of the household" to benefit those who are poor among us? What is your responsibility to your neighbor?

Unit

6

Collective Responsibility: From Darkness to Light

Introduction:

“The church has always responded to the human pain brought about by economic suffering,” Rebecca Blank argues. Yet, the church has often been silent, even silenced when it comes to confronting how our economy does or does not work for all the people. We must make a stronger connection between our faith, our biblical and theological resources, and our responsibility to care for one another.¹ Here is an example of how a faith community has stepped up to meet the challenge:

Brentwood United Methodist Church in Brentwood, Tenn., has had a weekly Career Transition Support Group for 20 years. But director Rick Ross said participation jumped dramatically starting in 2009. From an average of 50 a few years ago, attendance reached 240 at the last meeting. “The program is the largest of its kind in Nashville. We get attendees from all over the area, and with this we get employers sending us jobs. We forward those to the attendees,” Ross said. Speakers such as human resource managers present the latest on topics like interviewing skills. The church has started “Tools for Tough Times” to provide emergency gas and food. Ross said Sunday school classes provide free dinners for unemployed families each month. Organizers also offer online help, including a Yahoo group with 2,192 members.²

Opening Question: What do you think should be the role of the church today as more and more people experience severe economic hardship?

Delving into the Bible:**Isaiah 58:6-12 (MSG)**

⁶⁻⁹ “This is the kind of fast day I’m after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I’m interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You’ll call out for help and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’

⁹⁻¹² “If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places – firm muscles, strong bones. You’ll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which verse speaks to you the most? Why?
2. Vv. 6-9 state, “What I’m interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once.” Share how doing such things have changed your life. Have the lights turned on at your church?
3. Vv. 9-12 promises us full life if we are generous with the hungry and start giving ourselves to the down-and-out. What does this full-life look like? Have you witnessed and experienced this at your church?
4. What is your church’s plan to make your “community livable again?”

Bible Reflection:

By **Amy Oden** *Dean and Professor of History of Christianity*
Wesley Theological Seminary
Washington, D.C.

Taken as a whole book, Isaiah has addressed and tried to explain the Babylonian exile the Israelites had been under for 50 years, within the scope of a divine plan of judgment and restoration. The prophet interrupts their claims to piety by calling for a series of behaviors we recognize as themes throughout the prophets: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share what we have with those who have not, to bring the homeless into one’s house, to give clothing and shelter to the naked, to reconcile with one’s family, to help the afflicted. These are more than one time actions. These are behaviors with broad social consequences, actions that will restructure relationships. God’s desire is not for singular, pious acts, but for a whole cloth dismantling of unjust relationships. Instead of the traditional fast days, “the fast that I choose,” says God, is a whole new way of life. Isaiah reframes fasting as a practice. It is no longer the periodic fast days that serve to punctuate ongoing life. Instead, fasting is a new set of relationships within ongoing life. *The fasting acceptable to God is a daily fast from domination, blaming others, evil speech, self-satisfaction, entitlement and blindness to one’s privilege. The fast that God seeks calls for vigilance for justice and generosity day in and day out.*

The fasting God seeks requires and promises much more. The “if-then” pattern of verses 8-12 sets forth the consequences of such a fast. *If the people choose the fast God sets before them, then they will have the blessing they seek: light, healing, help, protection, satisfying of needs, and, most centrally, the presence and guidance of God among them. The people, individually and corporately, cannot have a full relationship with God without a just relationship with each other. One’s piety is not disconnected from the rest of everyday life. When right relationship is pursued, God is among the people, “Here I am.”* The glory and holiness of God is made manifest in this kind of godly fast. Isaiah reminds us that this is a God who a) wants more than a formal relationship with the people, b) expects us to be partners in bringing forth God’s purposes and c) is responsive to our choices. The good news is that God calls us, again and again, into God’s own life.³

1 <http://www.ucc.org/justice/economic-justice/in-hard-economic-times.html>

2 <http://www.decatordaily.com/stories/Other-Southern-churches-helping-jobless-too-as-unemployment-rises,52934>

3 http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/6/2011

Information and Statistics:

Look back on all the information and statistics sections of five previous Bible studies and review them.

Question to consider: Which economic issue concerns your church and how might your church start to address that issue?

Activities for the Week:

1. Organize people from your congregation to volunteer at a local worker center near your church.
2. Consider establishing some kind of a career transition program or jobs club at your church. Look into joining the Faith Advocates for Jobs which is a major new interfaith campaign initiated by Interfaith Worker Justice to address the severe suffering being endured by millions of unemployed workers. The campaign is organizing a nationwide network of congregations committed to supporting the unemployed and their families both spiritually and materially. Follow this link to learn more about it: <http://www.iwj.org/network/faith-advocates-for-jobs>
3. Think about coordinating a prayer vigil for your community.
4. Review your denominational guidelines regarding just compensations and other ethical questions regarding the hiring and treatment of employees.
5. During the offering time, have members sign important legislative postcards regarding worker rights and have them drop it off along with their offering into the offering basket.

Contemporary Reflection:

By Lynne Hybels an excerpt from *“What is an Evangelical?”*

I grew up in a form of Christianity in which “saving souls” was pretty much all that mattered. The God I discovered in that church was a harsh, demanding tyrant; I knew that if I wanted to earn God’s love I would have to be very good, follow all the rules, and work very hard. As a devout adolescent I did that. As a young pastor’s wife I did that. Unfortunately, I worked a little too hard and eventually became utterly exhausted, seriously depressed, and physically sick. That plunged me into a total life crisis in which I felt compelled to give up the God of my childhood.

Fortunately, a wise friend said to me, “For a while, forget everything you’ve ever thought about Christianity; forget the Old Testament; forget Paul and the epistles – and just read Jesus.” So for months – for years actually – I just read Jesus. And slowly but surely, Jesus reshaped my understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

In Jesus I found a radical call to compassionate action in the world. At Jesus’ first public appearance he said, “I have come to set the captives free and to preach good news to the poor.” Then, through his teaching and life of servanthood, he slowly and methodically turned the values of the powerful Roman Empire upside down. He threw the moneychangers out of the temple because they were exploiting the poor. He said that when we feed the hungry or clothe the naked it’s like we’re doing it to him. He said to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us. Jesus changed the rules and ushered in an upside-down Kingdom.

Histories of the early church record that when deadly plagues cut a black swath through communities, all the healthy people left except the crazy followers of Jesus, because they knew they were called to care for the sick – for the least – and they weren’t afraid of the consequences, even death.

I am a Christian today because of what I found in Jesus.

Reflection Question: How can your church make a difference for those who are going through what seems like an economic “deadly plague?”