

**“Addressing Poverty in Calgary: Issues, Challenges, Strategies”**  
**Chair of Christian Thought Iwaasa Lecture on Urban Theology**  
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*Why Jesus Didn't Talk Very Much About the Poor*

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## **1. Jesus' Silence on Poverty**

For many people the Christian faith and poverty are deeply interconnected. Acts of charity are widely viewed as a key aspect of the Christian life and the church has a long history of providing relief and advocating for justice for the poor. It's somewhat puzzling then to discover that Christ himself said very little at all about poverty or the poor. And, most of what he did say about poverty is actually rather troubling to those of us who have made tackling it a priority. In reading through the gospels there are in fact only five principle references to the poor, only one of which actually admonishes anyone to do anything about it. In that case, Jesus admonishes the rich young man to go sell what he has and give it to the poor, but this seems to have much more to do with the state of the rich man's soul than it does with the plight of the poor.

The other times Jesus' mentions the poor he tells us that the poor are "blessed", while the recounting of the poor widow putting her coins in the collection box praises the faith of the poor, but is silent on the condition of poverty itself. And in the most direct reference to the poor, Jesus admonishes the Disciples for their charitable zeal, reminding them (and us) that "the poor will be with you always." So when Jesus then instructs John's disciples to report to John that "the good news is proclaimed to the poor", we are left wondering what good news could that possibly be?

## **2. Jesus as Healer**

Although Jesus makes little specific mention of poverty per se, the gospels are full of references to him as a healer. Where the word "poor" appears only 25 times in all four gospels combined, the word "heal" or "healing" appears 93 times. Now, while healing and poverty may seem somewhat distinct from each other, when we look at who it is that Jesus was healing it is those same people who, throughout the Bible, are referred to almost synonymously with the "poor":

i.e. the “widow,” the “alien,” the “afflicted”, and the “fatherless.”

What did it mean to be widowed, alien, afflicted or fatherless? In biblical society it meant to be outside the structures of family and community that sustained people. It meant to be excluded. So healing had a profound social dimension as it involved intentionally engaging with those who were excluded. Where shunned, Jesus entered into relationship. The act of healing itself was a statement of the value he placed on those society chose to exclude.

And the impact of that healing was also deeply social. When He healed a person with leprosy He didn't simply treat the disease, He restored the person to their community. When He healed a person who was blind or lame, He restored to them the ability to actively participate in community life in a time before disability benefits or social security. Healing, then, did more than just repair the body, it brought people back inside the shelter of the community. And since those Jesus was healing were also those most often thought of as poor, Jesus ministry of healing is a ministry to the poor and gives a glimpse of a new understanding of poverty. The real healing that took place was not so much the healing of the body, but of the broken relationships within community that led to poverty.

### **3. Poverty is a Wound not a Problem**

When we look at it this way, poverty isn't so much a problem to be fixed as it is a wound to be healed. Poverty separates. Poverty isolates. Poverty engenders guilt, shame and accusations. Poverty creates fear and helplessness. A participant in a poverty workshop we held described poverty this way:

*“Emptiness, destitute, hopelessness, helplessness, sadness, darkness, lost, no identity, no self-esteem, coldness, ashamed, no voice, no family, no grandchildren, no smiles, no privacy, no laughter, no happiness—this is what living in poverty means.”*

Interestingly, she made no mention of money. Rather, she talked about broken relationships, isolation, and the pain that accompanies that. She didn't describe a problem; she spoke about a wound, a wound in the fabric of our community.

If poverty is a wound in the fabric of the community it is a community of which we are all a part and so we all are wounded. This is the wound that we experience, first, in our eagerness to disconnect from community as we idealize the value of independence. We idolize the “self-made man (or woman)” and the ideal of “self-reliance”, seeing ourselves and each other as competitors in a game with scarce resources where we must fight for our share. When we buy into this notion of scarcity, we fail to acknowledge God as our sustainer and the source of our abundance. So too when we buy into the myth of self-reliance, we willingly deny the reality that nobody has done it by themselves, as we are all inter-dependent, existing within the bonds of community, humbly dependent upon God and each other.

We experience this wound next in how we define ourselves. Rather than viewing each other as children of God, we have come to view ourselves (and each other) as “consumers”, defined by our willingness and ability to consume. Somehow “shopping” has become a civic duty as our economic health seems based on our ability and desire to consume. Our need to consume leaves us working long hours, at the expense of family and community, and hopelessly in debt. Meanwhile, those who can’t consume get left behind – excluded.

This brokenness also appears in our eagerness to divide people into categories. We talk about “the poor” as though they are a separate species. Once we label people, it is easy to see them as something “other” than us, and once we do that, we can easily assign blame and deny rights, exacerbating the isolation of those we choose to exclude. It is easy to see the question of poverty as a competition between “the poor” and the “non-poor”; between “us” and “them”, between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” and further tear the fabric of our community.

We then experience this wound in the broken relationships we have with each other. As the bonds of community weaken, more and more people experience isolation. Loneliness is one of the great scourges of our society and both a cause and result of poverty. When we lack close relationships with family, friends and neighbours we are at greater risk of spiralling into poverty when things go wrong. And once in poverty, that isolation often keeps you there.

Lacking the bonds of community we then devise systems of care for those left behind that substitute for the rich relationships we might otherwise have had with each other. In their book “The Abundant Community”, authors John McKnight and Peter Block call us the “incompetent” society because we have lost the ability to do the most important functions of caring for each other as families and neighbours, relying instead on systems or services that can be provided by agencies or purchased in the marketplace. We have depersonalized even the most intimate aspects of our lives.

These then are the deep wounds of community that are at the root of poverty and that diminish every one of us; the wounds of disconnectedness, of depersonalized relationships that allow us to define and relate to each other as something other than children of God worthy of dignity and respect. These are the wounds in need of healing and of which poverty is just a symptom.

#### **4. It’s About Relationships of Power and Justice**

Ultimately, poverty is about power. In the bible, those identified as “poor” are the ones who, for various reasons found themselves on the fringes of society, excluded from power and community life. If we think about our world today, we find that things are not that different. Those most likely to be poor in Calgary are lone-parent families or people without families, Aboriginal persons dispossessed of their land, recent immigrants and temporary foreign workers, and persons with disabilities. In short: the widow, the alien, the afflicted and the fatherless; those who are also largely excluded from our own structures of power and support.

In the Old Testament, laws and institutions were developed to keep power imbalances in check. This included the practice of Jubilee where the poor were released from debts every seven years and allowed to reap from the fallow fields, or the practice of leaving some of the harvest untouched for others to reap and glean. In this way, social justice became embedded in the institutions of the Jewish state.

We too have embedded systems and laws that seek fairness and justice. We have labour laws and minimum wages, social security and medicare paid for by our tax system. We also have rules and systems in place to direct charitable contributions to organizations tasked with supporting those

in need. And we have programs and services, supported by public and private funds, available to assist people. We also have obligations under international law to provide for the economic and social rights of people. Such laws and institutions are good.

Our stumbling block, however, is that we have let these systems substitute for deep and nurturing human relationships. We no longer need to concern ourselves with the welfare of our employees as we have systems that will take care of that. We no longer need to concern ourselves with the well-being of our neighbours as long as there are programs and services available to support them. We no longer need to provide caring and support in person as we can provide a charitable contribution instead, to the charity of our choice, and get a tax receipt in return. We have turned our compassion into transactional relationships mediated by governments and institutions. We have truly become “consumers” and “taxpayers” as opposed to “citizens” and “neighbours”. We can in good conscience walk around the homeless person on the street, or the Samaritan on the road, because we have all paid our taxes and made our charitable donations. There is someone who is being tasked with looking after the Samaritan for us. All we have to do is call; if we will.

## **5. In the End it's Personal**

Except Jesus doesn't let us off the hook. Jesus makes it personal. Jesus says *I* was a stranger. *I* was naked. *I* was hungry. *I* was in prison, and *you* didn't visit, clothe or feed me. Because for Jesus, it's all about the relationship. In Jesus, we are confronted with the human dimension that reminds us that we are connected to each other in relationships for which laws and institutions are no substitute.

Now there is nothing wrong with the systems and institutions we have developed. Indeed, the justice they embody is what the prophets have called us to do. And Jesus never suggested that the laws and exhortations to institutional justice were in any way wrong. But they are insufficient. Jesus told his disciples that he is here, not to *replace* the law, but to *fulfill* it. To fulfill it by restoring the broken relationships that required those laws and institutions in the first place.

This begins the process of *healing* rather than *fixing* poverty. Fixing poverty views poverty as a problem amenable to a solution. The problem must be defined, analyzed and solutions planned,

most likely by an expert. We will research best practices, we will create logic models, identify outcomes, mobilize resources, and we will monitor and evaluate results. We will treat people as objects to be manipulated with interventions rather than as human beings in need of dignity and respect. In short, it will re-enforce the systems and structures that have come to substitute for genuine human compassion and relationship.

When we view poverty as a problem to be fixed, the solution itself begins to reinforce the very causes of poverty by further entrenching the distinction between “us” and “them”; by defining and labelling people as “poor”, and establishing a power relationship between the helper and the helped. When Jesus healed, however, he upset all of the power dynamics between the powerful and the weak. For Jesus, healing wasn’t about devising impersonal systems or fixing things. For Jesus, healing was a very personal activity that almost always involved Him establishing a relationship with the person being healed. It usually involved a conversation between the healer and the healed, the consent (and faith) of the person seeking healing, some physical connection and often at the end an act of restoration with the community. Healing then involved reciprocity and a breaking down of the power imbalances that kept people in poverty.

Now while Jesus might not have said much about the poor, he did say a lot about power. The beatitudes speak directly to what has been referred to as the “Upside Down Kingdom” where the first become the last and the last become the first; where the powerless are the powerful; where those who believe they have the solutions are left speechless, while the healer and healed enter into a new relationship of reciprocity, consent and respect and the weak are restored to the shelter of community life.

## **6. A Healing Approach to Poverty**

What does this then suggest about how we should go about healing, as opposed to fixing, poverty? First, I believe it challenges us to alter not only how we see others, but also how we see ourselves. When we stop talking about fixing poverty and begin talking instead about healing it, we come to recognize that we all suffer the wounds of broken community and are all vulnerable. When we come to this place we can then move beyond the solutions that allow us to categorize people and establish power relationships in the guise of helping. Rather, we can establish

authentic healing relationships where both healer and healed experience the need and effects of healing.

Secondly, in this approach, how we do what we do becomes as important as what we do. Do the systems and interventions we devise in the guise of helping establish authentic human relationships based on reciprocity or do they further depersonalize and stigmatize? How can we re-personalize the relationships that institutions and the market have depersonalized, and reclaim them? This challenges us to think about our relationships with each other in all aspects of our public and private lives. How do our choices as consumers affect the rights of others? What is the impact of our business decisions on those in our workplaces? How does our obsession with lower taxes impact those with the least power?

Finally, I think this view leads us to a place where power is central. The goal of any healing work must be to restore the wholeness of community by actively including those who are excluded. While there is an important role here for institutional justice, it is also a deeply personal endeavour. We must ask ourselves how are we actively including vulnerable people in our workplaces? How are we sharing power and decision-making with those who are being affected by our decisions? Are we in fact willing to become vulnerable by giving up power and control to new voices who may not have previously been at the table? Only when we start to answer these questions do we begin to address the challenge of including the excluded that is at the root of healing. Only then can we begin to move beyond the many distinctions between “us” and “them” and start to re-establish the broken bonds of community that lie at the heart of poverty and diminish us all.

So, perhaps the reason Jesus doesn't talk very much about the poor is because Jesus didn't divide the world into poor and non-poor. Jesus didn't make any distinctions between “us” and “them”, because in the end it's not about the poor. In the end it's about the relationships we nurture amongst each other as family members, neighbours, employers and citizens. If we are truly committed to seeing every one of us as children of God, all equally loved and equally vulnerable, all equally in need of God's grace and reliant on God and each other, this will lead us to see and treat each other with dignity and respect.

When we come to this healing place, we will have begun relating to each other in ways that don't allow poverty to take root and flourish. We will still have our laws and institutions and programs and systems that provide support and execute justice, but they will no longer be the substitutes for the mercy and compassion that we are called to. We will have found the trust that allows community to flourish, and in which we find our resilience. And that is the resilience that will mobilize the abundance around us. And this is the good news that Jesus proclaimed to the poor which, in the end it turns out, is every single one of us.