

A dangerous God

Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-17

January 26, 2014

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.
(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)*

“Seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last thirty years.”

Does it matter?

In our own country, we like to talk about the current economic recovery, but ninety-five percent of the growth in wealth since the 2008 financial crisis has gone to the wealthiest one-percent of Americans, while, during that same period, the bottom ninety percent of the population has become poorer.

Does it matter?

Those numbers come from a report prepared by Oxfam International for the World Economic Forum held this week in Davos, Switzerland. The people at Oxfam believe growing global economic inequality poses a grave threat to human welfare, to democratic governance, and to peace. The report states:

Some economic inequality is essential to drive growth and progress, rewarding those with talent, hard earned skills, and the ambition to innovate and take entrepreneurial risks. However, the extreme levels of wealth concentration occurring today threaten to exclude hundreds of millions of people from realizing the benefits of their talents and hard work.

And how extreme is wealth concentration today? In 2013, eighty five people, the eighty-five richest people in the world, controlled as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's population. Eighty-five people, eighty-five people living in this world right now personally own as much as the bottom three and a half billion people living on this planet right now, combined.

Does it matter?

But let's not think about eighty-five and three and a half billion. Let's think about just two. Let's compare one of those eighty-five people to one of those three and a half billion people.

But we can't. There is no meaningful statistical comparison. When we put these two human beings side by side, one has everything and the other has nothing.

Does it matter?

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Listen. Do you hear that? It is the sound of silence, the silence of people doing ... well enough, the silence of Christians doing ... well enough. It is my silence. It is your silence.

But not all of us are staying quiet! Pope Francis is not keeping silent.

Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality.

So he writes in chapter 2 of his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the gospel of joy. We have to say, "No!" he says. We have to speak up. We cannot remain silent. Because? Because we are bearers of good news, good news which will bring great joy to all the people. Because God's "Yes" to life and to justice and to human dignity and to human value is also God's "No" to any and all powers of death and injustice and indignity and dehumanization.

To all such powers, God is dangerous!

*You have broken the yoke that burdened them
and the rod that beat their shoulders.
You have defeated the nation
that oppressed and exploited your people.*

God breaks yokes and sets people free. God defeats oppressive and exploitive powers. God is dangerous. Francis writes:

When [the marketplace is] absolutized, God can only be seen as uncontrollable, unmanageable, even dangerous, since he calls human beings to their full realization and to freedom from all forms of enslavement ...

Is Francis suggesting that the marketplace itself is sinful, that the free market economy is itself exploitive? No, not necessarily. God becomes the enemy of the marketplace when it is absolutized, when it, the free market economy itself, becomes a god to be worshipped and served unquestioningly.

That's the problem. That's the sin, the sin of idolatry. Francis writes:

People continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.

“Sacralized,” which means held as sacred, not to be questioned. We trust “in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system ...” And “meanwhile,” Francis continues, “the excluded are still waiting.”

We make an idol of the prevailing economic system and we make an idol of money.

The worship of the ancient golden calf, Francis writes, has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.

Again, Francis is not arguing the merits or demerits of one economic system over against another. He is no Marxist! He is arguing against any system, any power, any thing, which claims our absolute allegiance, which becomes an end in itself, which becomes, no longer our servant, but now our master. When we make an absolute of market economics, all other values are sacrificed at its altar, and we become its slaves. Morality is marginalized. God is marginalized. People are marginalized.

David Simon, an American author, journalist, and television producer has written:

That may be the ultimate tragedy of capitalism in our time, that it has achieved its dominance without regard to a social compact, without being connected to any other metric for human progress ...

If the stock market is gaining, if the economy is growing, if new markets are being developed, then we are doing well. But who is “we?” There really isn't any “we,” is there? It's all about the system. Some of us may be able to climb on the back of this untamed beast for a while and use it to our advantage, but the system itself doesn't care. The system itself doesn't care about us or about any human being.

The system doesn't care because it can't, and the system isn't just because it can't be just. Only human beings can care. Only human beings can be just. We are the ones who give the system power, by our unquestioning allegiance, and we are the ones who can take it away. The Oxfam report asserts: "Extreme inequality is not inevitable, and it can and must be reversed quickly."

But it will only be reversed when we refuse to be silent, when we, like God, become dangerous. Dangerous because we dare to challenge prevailing assumptions. Dangerous because we will not "calmly accept [money's] dominion over ourselves and our societies." Dangerous because we will bow to no one and no thing, serve no one and no thing, other than the living God. Dangerous because we boldly shine God's light into the darkness, the darkness of our common complicity with injustice, the darkness of our common indifference to suffering, the darkness of our sin.

"Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!" That was Jesus' message: "Turn away from your sins!" Why? Because the kingdom of heaven is near.

And what do you suppose things will be like in the kingdom of heaven? What do you suppose things be like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven? Will eighty-five people enjoy as much of God's blessing and God's bounty as another three and a half billion people combined?

Turn away from your sins!

Turn away from the sin of idolatry, of putting your trust in something else, in anything else, other than God.

Turn away from the sin of stealing, because, as Francis warns us, quoting John Chrysostom, the 4th century Christian preacher:

Not to share one's wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs ...

Because, of course, all that we have comes from God, and God gives justly, so if I have more than enough and you have too little ...

Turn away from the sin of idolatry and turn away from the sin of stealing. And turn away from the sin of silence.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.