

Life Together

sermon digest

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James 2:1-5, 12-17

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His name was Walter Rauschenbusch. Born in 1861 to a pious German immigrant pastor turned seminary professor, his name reflected his father's fervent prayer at his birth: "*Walt' Herr, uber diesem Kinde*" (Rule, Lord, over this child). He, too, became a pastor and later, as he lost his hearing, a professor in Rochester Theological Seminary where he occupied the position vacated by his father. As a student, he was bright and courageous, going against the strong personality of his father, whom he respected, to open up to the then new methodologies of study and insight into the Christian faith. As a pastor, he ventured first into the renown Haymarket area of Louisville, Kentucky, for an interim pastorate during summer breaks from seminary and then into New York City's West Side just beyond Hell's Kitchen where gangs of hoodlums roamed and a few blocks west of the Tenderloin, where prostitutes and gamblers ruled the day.

New York City at the time numbered a whopping 1.5 million people, making it the largest city in the nation and the second largest city in the world. Boat load after boat load of immigrants had emptied into the city and been left to scramble to gain a foothold in a time of severe economic recession. The city, as the nation, boasted a thin veneer of the filthy rich who prospered off of the work of the desperately poor. All over the city, people lived crowded into squalid tenement housing where they became easy prey for disease and whoever or whatever might take advantage of their plight. In one part of the city, 68 percent of the deaths occurred among children age five and under. Living in near poverty himself, Rauschenbusch felt nothing more deeply: "Oh, the children's funerals! They gripped my heart—that was one of the things I always went away thinking about—why did the children have to die?" [In Paul Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch*, 60].

There were those who had an answer. God willed it. It was an answer Rauschenbusch would not buy. Increasingly, he found himself compelled to address the social ills that stretched out around him. For too long, he insisted, the church had been in the service of an individualistic view of sin. It had been consumed with railing out against the personal sins of adultery, gambling and liquor and the sins of heresy against the church's teachings. In the process, it had turned its back upon anything other than an other-worldly hope for the Kingdom of God. It had turned its back upon the sins of selfishness and greed that robbed workers of their dignity and fathers and mothers of hope for their children. Recalling the story of a Mennonite farmer who had uttered a worldly oath on seeing milk he had delivered to market labeled as being contaminated, Rauschenbusch observed with sad humor the fact that the man was disciplined by his church "not for introducing cow-dung into the intestines of babies," but for his oath [*Theology for a Social Gospel*, 35].

To find the climax of sin we must not linger over a man who swears, or sneers at religion, or denies the mystery of the trinity, but put our hands on social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into the private property of a small call, or have left the peasant labourers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights in the land --*Theology for a Social Gospel*, 50.

Rauschenbusch joined his voice with other prophetic voices and turned the spotlight on those sins of selfishness and greed which were literally wringing the lifeblood out of the common laborers who held this country together. His Social Gospel Movement gave significant voice and influence to the church in the ensuing struggle for workers' rights. Thus, at its founding meeting in 1908, the Federal Council of Churches, forerunner of the National Council of Churches of Christ, placed on the table as one of its first orders of business adoption of the Social Creed of 1908. It opened with the words,

"We deem it the duty of all Christian people to concern themselves directly with certain practical industrial problems. To us it seems that the Churches must stand—For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life." The creed went on to pledge support for efforts to ensure the safety of workers, abolish child labor, limit the number of hours in a work week and the work week itself to a maximum of six days, and the establishment of a minimum wage and provision for workers in their old age. Speaking before the council some years later, President Franklin Roosevelt applauded the significance of the churches efforts in effecting social change that literally transformed the lives and livelihood of the American people.

So what did Rauschenbusch and the now National Council of Churches actually succeed in doing? Did they abandon their primary calling to meddle in the affairs of government and corporations? Were they out of their league or worse, AWOL from their responsibility to bear the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Only if we ignore the teachings of scripture and the example of Jesus himself. As we have noted so many times before, Jewish scripture is laden with repeated injunctions to care for the weak in society. The Torah is replete with prescriptions for mercy and justice for those who are poor or strangers in the land. As we read from Amos this morning, the prophets have no patience with religion devoid of mercy and justice. It stinks, they insist, to high heaven; and God cannot stomach the stench.

Jesus was highly sensitive to the heavy burdens dished out by the political and religious establishments of his day. He pronounced blessing upon the poor and oppressed and extended a welcome: "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The church Jesus left behind consisted of the poor and disenfranchised and made a name for itself by its practice of love and mercy. Why on earth, the epistle of James asks, would you then

fawn over the rich? Why would you give them the best seats in the house? Why would you even think of minimizing the fact that it is they who laughingly sneer at the name of Jesus and drag you into court or withhold your hard earned wages? Remember two things, he says: God is on the side of the poor. Imitate God in your behavior. Just as God has extended mercy toward you, extend mercy and justice toward them. And remember, too, the “royal law” or the “law of liberty” handed down by none other than Jesus himself. “Love God”—yes. And, “love your neighbor.” You have received the good news of the gospel? Well and good. But where is the good news for your neighbors? Has the good news that has claimed you extended through you to them? “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (2:15-17).

When you cross into the Promised Land, the Deuteronomist counsels the people Israel, “There will be no one in need among you. But then he goes on, “If there is among you anyone in need . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor” (15:4, 7). Given the blessings of God, there will be no need for there to be persons among you who are poor, the Deuteronomist is saying, and if there are, be sure it is not by God’s design and be moved with compassion.

Fast forward now to the twenty-first century and to the economic crisis that besets our reality. According to the Economic Policy Institute, about 30% of the American work force earn less than \$10 per hour. They are the people who clean our office buildings, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, handpick our fresh produce, and wait on us in the stores. Even though they work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. Many work multiple jobs and end up paying 50 or even 70% of their income for housing, compared to the 30% recommended expenditure. They teeter on the precipice of financial ruin and homelessness. They are only one emergency, one health crisis away from falling off the edge.

While the news media focuses on what is happening to middle and upper middle class workers in this recession, the already poor--the migrant workers, the janitors, maids and security guards have all but disappeared. Yet, according to the Economic Policy Institute, current data shows that while the last two recessions produced mass white-collar layoffs, the brunt of the current crisis is being borne by the blue-collar working class, whose unemployment level is increasing at three times the rate of white-collar unemployment. Add to this the slide downward that began in the 1980’s as industrial jobs began leaving the country, and the crisis is only magnified. The New York Times reported earlier this month that one-third of Americans can no longer afford to fill their prescriptions or at least take their prescriptions at the level prescribed. Catholic Charities has reported a rise in domestic violence in many parts of the country, which may be attributed to the combination of unemployment and the overcrowding that takes place as extended families have to move in together. About 70 percent of the people seeking emergency shelter in St. Louis currently report they had been living with relatives “but the place was too small.” Asked about her situation now that her daughter had lost her job and had to move in with her in her small trailer, one mother replied bleakly, “I just stay in my bedroom.” [Barbara Ehrenreich, “Too Poor to Make the News,” Op-Ed, *New York Times*, June 14, 2009].

At this point, pointing the finger of blame would seem a worthy conclusion. We could then dust our hands of the matter and go home feeling vindicated. The answer, however, is not so easy. The answer lies in many different directions. It resides in the debates now being hammered out in Washington and it calls upon us to pay close attention and practice the stewardship of our responsibility as citizens whether we come to unanimous decision with one another and walk in lockstep or not. It calls upon us to risk disagreeing with each other and learning how to talk to one another and respect one another still in spite of our disagreements. It calls upon us to be a people who have the courage to open our eyes and become fully informed about the pain and suffering of others so that God’s love and compassion might flow through us in ways to make a difference in ourselves, our society and the lives of those in distress. “Heart religion,” Rauschenbusch observed, “is always a cry of need” [*Theology*, 17]. If we desire to return to a religion of the heart, a religion of deep passion, the best path we can follow may well be the path trod by those who have gone before us, giving themselves in tireless devotion to bringing peace and comfort to those so sorely afflicted.

Meeting in 2008, the National Council of Churches revisited its social creed of the previous century and worded a new creed to face the demands and needs of the twenty-first century. It begins:

We Churches of the United States have a message of hope for a fearful time. . . . In our era of globalization we offer a vision of a society that shares more and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms. . . . We do so as disciples of the One who came ‘that all may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10) and stand in solidarity with Christians and with all who strive for justice around the globe.”

—*A Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century*, National Council of Churches, 2008

The creed goes on to spell out thirteen specific items for action. I encourage you to visit the council’s web site and read the creed for yourself. Better yet, I encourage you to link to the Presbyterian web site and view the video about the creed. You may well find some aspects with which you disagree, but that’s okay. The challenge to find practical and effective avenues for embodying mercy and compassion in our shared society couldn’t be greater. It will take the best that all of us have to give. At bottom, however, it will take our shared determination that we can and must do

better in alleviating the suffering of so many good, working people.

And who knows? Perhaps in confronting the crisis we will find again a new sense of passion in our faith as we reach beyond any easy answers, any quick fixes, any salving of our conscience. Perhaps we will even be moved again to real prayer that expresses itself in action. It's happened before. Can it happen again?