

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 13, 2022

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## Blessed to be a Blessing

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“The poor deserve their lot,” said no follower of the Way of Jesus Christ...**ever**. And yet...looking at the world around us...that notion seems to be a rather prevalent one. We may not say that phrase out loud, but we have sure structured our society around it as a central tenet of many of our systems.

What do I mean? Well, we have structured our society such that a single major medical event can, and often does, bankrupt families.<sup>1</sup> So a person who has the audacity to get sick, or be in an accident, deserves to be made poor.

We have structured our society so that many who want to pursue higher education must take on high amounts of debt that is structured to be very difficult to discharge if something bad happens to the borrower.<sup>2</sup> Recently, banks have started to leverage student loans in much the same way that they used mortgages causing the 2008 financial crisis. It's known as student loan asset-backed securities (SLABS).<sup>3</sup> So, a person who wishes to pursue higher education (something my generation and the generations following have been told is the most important thing we can do to succeed) must take on an average of \$42,000 in debt (mostly due to education costs rising an average of 6% a year since 2000, far out pacing inflation and

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<sup>1</sup> Two thirds of all personal bankruptcies are due to medical bills. (Source: “Medical Bankruptcy: Still Common Despite the Affordable Care Act” by David Himmelstein, M.D., et al., March 2019. American Journal of Public Health)

<sup>2</sup> O'Neill, C. (2019, August 29). *Student loan debt in bankruptcy*. [www.nolo.com](https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/student-loan-debt-bankruptcy.html). Retrieved February 10, 2022, from <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/student-loan-debt-bankruptcy.html>

<sup>3</sup> Roy, Samantha and Ryan, Christopher, The Next 'Big Short': COVID-19, Student Loan Discharge in Bankruptcy, and the SLABS Market (June 20, 2020). SMU Law Review, Vol. 74, 809-49 (2020)., Roger Williams Univ. Legal Studies Paper Forthcoming, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3631953> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3631953>

wage growth over that same time period).<sup>4</sup> And then those students are blamed when they cannot earn enough income to pay back those loans.

We have structured our society so that shared necessities like roads, trains, shipping lanes and harbors, public education, water, the post office, sanitation, law enforcement and emergency services, safety net programs, veteran benefits, and the country's natural resources are primarily paid for by individuals as opposed to the corporations that get far more benefit from them. Why does an American, making the median salary (\$67,521 in 2020<sup>5</sup>) pay a tax rate of 22%<sup>6</sup> when major corporations, who are making record profits and who use shared services and resources far more, often pay no federal taxes at all<sup>7</sup>? So, a person who wishes to have a decent quality of life, which requires clean water and air, safety, infrastructure, basic education, sanitation, and other fundamental services, deserves to pay more than the businesses that utilize those share services and resources far more (*c.f.* Walmart employees on food stamps<sup>8</sup>). This is a long way of saying that average citizens deserve to be poorer than the wealthy and corporations.

To be honest, I could keep going (don't get me started on how for-profit prisons have become modern day slave plantations). Most of our systems operate under the assumption that the poor somehow deserve their lot in life. And unfortunately, many Americans believe this too, one poll finding that 52% of Americans believe that the poor are poor because they "lack motivation."<sup>9</sup> Let me be clear, this is an unchristian and unethical stance. It is also demonstrably false. Most people experiencing poverty in America

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<sup>4</sup> *10 key facts about student debt in the United States*. Peter G. Peterson Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved February 10, 2022, from <https://www.pgpf.org/blog/2021/05/10-key-facts-about-student-debt-in-the-united-states>

<sup>5</sup> Bureau, U. S. C. (2021, October 18). *Income and poverty in the United States: 2020*. Census.gov. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>

<sup>6</sup> Bird, B. (2021, December 8). *How much does the average American pay in taxes?* The Balance. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.thebalance.com/what-the-average-american-pays-in-taxes-4768594>

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, P. (2021, April 2). *No federal taxes for dozens of big, profitable companies*. The New York Times. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/business/economy/zero-corporate-tax.html>

<sup>8</sup> Miao, H. (2020, November 19). *Walmart and McDonald's are among top employers of Medicaid and food stamp beneficiaries, report says*. CNBC. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/walmart-and-mcdonalds-among-top-employers-of-medicaid-and-food-stamp-beneficiaries.html>

<sup>9</sup> *American attitudes about poverty and the poor*. PRB. (n.d.). Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.prb.org/resources/american-attitudes-about-poverty-and-the-poor/>

are trapped in cycles of poverty caused by our systems.<sup>10</sup> If you are unlucky enough to be born into a poor family, you are more likely to stay in poverty, die younger than average, end up in jail, have more health complications during your life, all while having less access to the resources and opportunities needed to escape poverty.<sup>11</sup>

Pastor Jon, what does all of this have to do with the Way of Jesus Christ? I'm glad you asked that question, rhetorical device in my head! Jesus spoke often about the need for the poor to be taken care of. Luke certainly makes it a high priority! Remember the themes we have been finding so far in Luke's Gospel? Mary's Magnificat, the songs of Zachariah and Simeon, all in the first three chapters, all mentioning salvation and the reversal of the status quo; then Jesus offers verses from Isaiah as his ministry's mission statement in the fourth chapter:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”  
(Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6, NRSV)

We can also explore the numerous teachings Christ gives regarding the wealthy and the pursuit of riches. I could spend a great deal of time walking through the Gospels and pointing out how negatively Jesus speaks of those with wealth and power. The story of the widow's mite springs quickly to mind (Luke 21, Mark 12), or the rich young ruler and the “eye of a needle” teaching (Luke 18, Matthew 19, Mark 10), or our reading for today: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” (Luke 6:24-26, NRSV)

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<sup>10</sup> Authors, Wagmiller, R. L., Adelman, R. M., Project, & Publication Type Report. (n.d.). *Childhood and intergenerational poverty: The long-term consequences of growing up poor*. NCCP. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.nccp.org/publication/childhood-and-intergenerational-poverty/>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

I can find nowhere in the teachings of Christ where we hear the sentiment that the poor deserve their lot, and the rich deserve their wealth. In fact, I have only ever found the exact opposite view being expressed. So, what are Christians doing?!?!? If we claim to be followers of the Way of Christ, we should be echoing his teachings. We should be reaching out to those in distress. We should be advocating for systems that take care of those who need help. We should be pointing out how messed up our systems are and how they work to keep people in poverty when they should be working to get people out of poverty. And we **ABSOLUTELY** need to be using our blessings to bless others.

Why is this such a central part of the Way of Christ? It is because Christ always wants his followers to focus on people and relationships over anything else. Wealth, power, and popularity all get in the way of that focus. Thomas Merton puts this succinctly: “The importance of detachment from things, the importance of poverty, is that we are supposed to be free from things that we might prefer to people. Wherever things have become more important than people, we are in trouble. That is the crux of the whole matter.”<sup>12</sup>

As followers of the Way of Christ, we have the privilege to join with God in blessing people who are poor, and hungry, and weeping, and outcast, and oppressed, and naked, and sick, and in prison, and in pain, and..., and..., and... The beatitudes are an invitation to find blessedness in the work of God, the Way of Christ, the care of others who need help. We are called to value people over anything else but God. And I would argue that valuing people is one of the best ways we value God too. We here at St. Stephen are richly blessed in a multitude of ways; I pray that we can use our blessings to bless the cosmos God so loves, use them to heap grace upon grace on our neighbors and the world around us. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton (1989). “*Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal : the Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*”, p.97, New Directions Publishing