

Carleen Gerber

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Isaiah 65:17-23 & 25b; Matthew 6:19-21; John 12:1-8

September 3, 2022

A Meditation on Low-Flying Turkeys, the Kindness of Strangers and the Joy of Dispossession

This weekend we celebrate what has come to be known in a number of countries as Labor Day. It was instituted in this country by Grover Cleveland in 1894, as a way of honoring workers. Following the Civil War, labor movements began to fight for fair labor practices, and the holiday was declared as a way of healing the nation from some violent clashes between striking workers and the police. You might remember reading the book “The Jungle” by Upton Sinclair. That book sought to expose the exceedingly harsh working conditions under which many in our country suffered in the first decades of the 20th century. In some industries 12 hour working days, seven days a week were the norm.

For most of us, Labor Day, has morphed more into a celebratory “last hurrah” of summer. A time for family reunions, and a last bastion of freedom before the rigors of the academic year begin.

But as this particular Labor Day approached, my thoughts were altogether drawn to America’s workers. And in a few minutes I’ll tell you a story about why.... But for now – a little more context.

I have recently been reading a fascinating, albeit sobering, book entitled “Poverty By America,” written by Matthew Desmond. Desmond is a professor of Sociology at Princeton University, author of the book “Evicted,” about America’s housing shortage, which you might have read a few years ago. He is highly respected in his field. His research is rigorous and meticulously documented; and, what’s more, he’s a powerful story teller. His new book seeks to look deeply and carefully at the intractability of poverty in America – and ask “Why?” Why, in arguably the richest nation in the world, are so many people living below the poverty line?

Desmond, and others, argue convincingly that it’s structures and systems that keep poverty so intractable. And these systems are designed more often than not with a total lack of insight about how they work together to make it impossible for people to escape from the vicious cycles of poverty.

Probably what will seem least surprising to most of us, as a causative factor in poverty, is our nation’s persistent, stubborn reluctance to raise the national minimum hourly wage to a “living wage.” Some politicians cite a fear that increasing the minimum wage will send prices for all goods spiraling higher, adding to the woes of inflation. But almost every bit of actual economic data proves the opposite to be true. A higher minimum wage puts more money *into* the economy, thereby strengthening it.

The second and third factors contributing most to persistent poverty are? Health care and housing costs.

Not long ago, I worked with a young woman who was struggling to survive economically. She was able to find work at a bargain department store in New London, and she lived close enough to be able to walk to work. Which was a blessing because she had no car.

She earned \$11.00 an hour. But the store capped her hours at 20 per week. Why? Because that meant they had no obligation to provide benefits, like health care. “The United

States has the unique distinction of lacking universal healthcare while still having the most expensive healthcare system in the world.” (Desmond 2023:17) The very structure of health care in our nation makes it exceedingly difficult, and costly, for businesses to offer health care to its employees.

My friend was trying to live independently while making \$220 per week. That meant she worked three full weeks out of every month just to pay just her rent. And her rent was only \$700 per month. (A housing cost unimaginably low in a rural community like ours) Groceries? A visit to the dentist? A new winter coat? For the most part, all of that would be completely out of reach. She was a college educated woman in her forties who had fallen on hard times. But, given the high cost of housing, it would be nigh unto impossible for any of us to live on less than \$11,000 per year. Even if we had not fallen on hard times.

And now I’d like to transition to my story about an encounter with a low-flying turkey. A few weeks ago I was returning home from some time in Canada. I had a granddaughter and her friend, both 13 years old, in the back seat of the car. And we were playing our music and singing along loudly, and having a fine time. When suddenly – seemingly out of nowhere – a very large body appeared from the right side of the road, flying low. This very large body was a turkey who was apparently trying to reach the other side of the highway. I was doing probably 70 miles an hour when the turkey hit my windshield front and center. And let me tell you, for the damage it did to my windshield, it might as well have been a flying cow.

The first and most important realization came to me immediately. The children are ok. I am ok. The car is still on the road.

The windshield, however, had become a giant spider web of cubed pieces of glass. And scattered all around the front seat of the car were little tiny shards and splinters of glass. But, the good news was that the windscreen itself seemed to be holding together while the car slowed down to a respectable 40 miles an hour.

The second realization dawned more slowly. I am still 475 miles from home. I am roughly speaking in the “middle of nowhere.” And when the predicted heavy rain starts in a few hours, there is no way that my wind-shield-wipers can be employed.

So, while still quite shaken, I limped along, wondering what on earth was to be the appropriate resolution of our dilemma. Thankfully, by phone, I was able to enlist help from Don, back home in Connecticut, as I continued to drive. The advice, solicited from our insurance company, was to drive very cautiously for the next 100 miles to their designated auto-body shop in Bangor, Maine. And let me just say – every one of those 100 miles were, essentially, in the middle of nowhere. Vast areas of northern Maine are townships known only by a number – not even a name.

All went remarkably well in those next 100 miles. And at long last we arrived at a place of business – called Safelite – though this is not intended as an advertisement. It was a huge relief to pull into their parking lot.

There’s a line in Tennessee William’s play “Streetcar Named Desire” that I’ve always loved. The sultry character named Blanche Dubois delivers this memorable line. “I’ve always relied on the kindness of strangers.” Sitting in that parking lot in Bangor Maine, Blanche and I had a lot in common.

Funny isn’t it? When you live in a small, serene little town like ours where everyone seems to know everyone else, you hardly ever find yourself saying those words, “I’ve always relied on the kindness of strangers.”

On a Friday afternoon in summer, with the weekend looming large, and with most auto-repair facilities closed on the weekends, the search was on to find the appropriate windshield to fit my car. And here is where my current reading of “Poverty by America” came into sharp focus. I watched as a very dedicated, capable and skilled group of young men hustled to fix broken windshields. For several hours I just watched them. They were doing work I couldn’t possibly do. I don’t have the skill. I don’t have the strength. Up and down ladders, wrestling and manipulating large, heavy sections of glass. I admired the ease and harmony with which they worked together. And I kept wondering what these folks earn per hour. I realized that here, in the middle of nowhere, I was totally dependent on their skill, and their hard work and dedication. Reflecting on the statistics in Desmond’s book, I found myself wondering if, working as hard as they do, they could support their families.

Here is one of the most baffling parts of Desmond’s treatise: “Decade after decade, the poverty rate in America has remained flat even as federal relief has surged.” (Desmond 2023:18) So, for the most part, it’s not like the government is not **trying** to solve the poverty dilemma. It’s more that *the approaches we are using are not successful*.

Perhaps you’ll join us in a few weeks to read this book, and think together as a community about all its wisdom. But let me try to shed some light on a few parts of the puzzle of the persistence of the poverty dilemma. And the challenge that that presents for America’s workers on this Labor Day weekend.

Here’s one part of the puzzle: The federal welfare system could surely be called a “leaky bucket.” We could do a better job of helping people access the help they need, and we could do a better job of designing the programs that will actually be most successful. So, while most of the money we need is there, it could be used more efficiently and wisely.

Here’s another piece of the puzzle: Our country has a two-tiered banking system that tends to exacerbate poverty. The system works quite well for people who have money and are able to save money. There are incentives – tax breaks – for those who are able to save. Think of college plans or tax-deferred IRA’s. Curious, isn’t it, that when the government subsidizes the income of those who fall below the poverty line, there are folks eager to criticize what they call a “government handout.” But many of us get a government “hand-up,” and that has an altogether positive connotation.

If you are living below the poverty line, and you fall behind in paying your bills, you will enter into the quick-sand world of dark-shadowed banking. Where interest rates compound and escalate. Quick sand is an apt description, because it’s very hard to escape.

And here is a third part of the puzzle: To add to the woes of the housing crisis in this country, a person of modest income will most likely be unable to qualify for a mortgage - even when they propose to use it to buy a home in the inner city that they *could actually afford* to own. But that house **will** sell, and probably will be bank-financed, to someone with more money who will rehab it and make money renting it to those of limited income. The government **could**, and I’ll say **should**, incentivize banks to give mortgages to people of lower income who show the promise of potential home ownership. The government **should** put resources into a colossal investment in housing affordability, accessibility and stability.

Desmond documents a number of cooperative housing projects in cities around our country, where coalitions of hard-working folks band their resources together to own – cooperatively own - an apartment building. Via Verde in the Bronx is one example. Bent Tree Apartments in Austin, Texas, is another.

Stable, decent housing is enormously important. Because, as we know all too well, there are far-reaching implications for the success of future generations of our country when we cluster those of lesser income in cities, and provide educational systems for their children that are far below our rural standards. The cooperative housing projects Desmond documents have shown remarkable success in stabilizing and humanizing life for those who live in them.

So, as I sat in the parking lot of a little Safe-Lite garage in Bangor, Maine, Mr. Desmonds' book flooded my mind. I wonder if these hard-working folks earn a living wage? I wonder if they are adequately housed? I wonder what are schools like in this city?

In our scripture lesson this morning from the gospel of John, we read the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany, where he had, not long before, raised their brother, Lazarus, from the dead. Following dinner, wanting to honor Jesus, and show her gratitude, Mary brings forth a bottle of pure oil of nard, a very costly perfume. And she proceeds to anoint and wipe Jesus' feet. The whole house was filled with the sweet fragrance of the perfume.

As this is happening, one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, raises a sharp objection, saying "What are you doing? That perfume could be sold for as much as three hundred denari, and the money given to the poor."

And Jesus' response to Judas is surprising. "Leave her alone," he says. "The poor you will always have with you, but today she honors me, as she will again in time, when she anoints my body upon my death."

The story is not a simple one to unpack. But what I hear Jesus emphasizing as he responds to Judas is the joy Mary finds in her self-less generosity. She has given a great gift to one who will, soon, no longer be among the living.

But why does Jesus say "The poor you will always with you?" There are people who have used those words of Jesus to justify taking minimal action to alleviate poverty. But I imagine Jesus simply spoke the truth: that poverty has always been, and will always be, a challenging problem with which society as a whole will have to wrestle. Perhaps for the society of Jesus' time, and surely for ours, it's not that there is a lack of money. The problem is one of access and equity.

The "joy" in the story is the joy of profoundly generous love.

During the height of the COVID crisis in this country, the federal government enacted a generous and broad program of assistance. "Because of generous unemployment benefits, stimulus checks, rental assistance, child tax credit and other forms of relief, poverty did not increase during what turned out to be the worst economic downturn in nearly a century. The U.S. economy lost millions of jobs during the pandemic, but there were roughly 16 million fewer Americans living in poverty in 2021 than in 2018." (Desmond 2023: 81)

In one section of his book, Desmond enters into some calculations about what it would cost to end poverty in our country. The machinations are intricate, but ultimately, based on the numbers we have from the COVID era, the number he settled on is 177 billion dollars. It is an almost unimaginable amount of money. But it **is**, actually, less than 1 percent of our Gross Domestic Product, the GDP. With that money, 177 billion dollars, we could ensure that every American had a place to live, every single one of us. We could end hunger and provide every child with a fairer shot at security and success. (Desmond 2023:125)

But where would the money come from, we ask? Here's just one answer: The United States loses more than one trillion dollars a year, every year, in unpaid taxes. (That number is a nearly 6 times the amount we just calculated that would mediate intractable poverty.) Giant

corporations, as well as some of our most wealthy individuals, are masterful at avoiding taxes. But that avoidance comes at a great cost to those who live in poverty. And it need not be so.

In this country, “We cannot look the American poor in the eye and say, “We’d love to help you, but we just can’t afford to. Because that is a lie.” (Desmond 2023:101)

There is a professor of Environmental Biology named Robin Wall Kimmerer whose work I admire. Some of us read her book, “Braiding Sweetgrass” in one of our study groups recently. She is a member of the indigenous Potawatomi Nation. And she brings to the table of societal dialogue the wisdom of indigenous peoples the world over: wisdom that we prize highly in this church. I’m going to read you a quote from her work;

“Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative, especially among people who live close to the land and know it’s waves of plenty and scarcity. Where the well-being of one is linked to the well-being of all. Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away. Hoarding the gift we become constipated with wealth, bloated with possessions, too heavy to join in the dance of life.” (Kimmerer 2013: 381) Kimmerer has coined the term “an economy of abundance.”

The phrase “where the well-being of one is linked to the well-being of all” is exactly what is meant by that Zulu word “Ubuntu” that we have used so many times in our own worship.

This is, for me, the “bottom line” of all this economic analysis: We need one another – rich and middle-class and poor – working and retired – skilled and unskilled. We depend on one another – in countless ways. When we underpay those who provide the services we need, we exploit them. When we fail to ask people to contribute **as they are able** to the good of society, we inflame the pain of those who live in poverty. When we lock people into intractable poverty, we leave them feeling defeated, dejected and disrespected. We rob them of hope.

Quite obviously, I am not still in Bangor, Maine. And that is only because of the hard work and skill of some folks whose names I don’t even know. Strangers upon whose kindnesses I did rely.

The manager of that store found the appropriate windshield in Boston Massachusetts, and, with diligence at his computer, managed to get it shipped to Bangor overnight. He drove us to a motel where we could spend the night. In the morning, when he came to give us a ride back to our refurbished car, I handed him a 100\$ bill that has been tucked away into the side of my wallet for a long time. I’m not really sure why it’s been there. Though perhaps it gave me some false sense of security.

The manager, of course, protested that he couldn’t take it. “Please, I said, “Just take it because that would make me feel good.”

It was only later on, after he’d received that one-hundred-dollar bill, that he said he’s gotten up at 4 am to drive from his home – which was an hour away – to his shop; because he wanted to be sure the correct windshield had arrived. And he had worked late the day before because there was so much broken glass scattered throughout the inside of my car.

In the one of his Four Quartets entitled, East Coker, T.S. Eliot has these haunting words:

To arrive at where you are, to get from where you are not, you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know, you must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by the way of dispossession...

And what you own is what you do not own.

In order to live in an economy of abundance, we must learn and learn again that we measure our wealth, at least in large part, by what we can give away. We are inextricably connected one to another, and when one thrives, we all thrive.

And in closing, I'd just like to say that I hope you'll boldly and courageously imagine what blessings we all might have if we did indeed live in an economy of abundance.

Hear again Elliot's words, "What you own is what you do not own." Maybe that's the lesson that made the sky seem bluer and the wildflowers on the median divider more beautiful as I made my way from Bangor to Lyme. Experiencing the economics of generosity and the grace of a stranger, I felt a little lighter, a little happier, in the dance of life. Should you ever need to rely on the kindness of strangers, may they be, for you, as skilled and compassionate and generous as they were for me.....

Amen.