

UPDATE

For the spirit of the city

RICHMOND
HILL

2209 EAST GRACE STREET RICHMOND, VA

MAY 2012

TENDING THE SPIRIT

The poverty of wealth

Every summer, thousands of dedicated Virginians spend thousands of dollars per person to get on an airplane and take a mission trip – to South America, to Central America, to North, West, and East Africa, or to a reservation in South Dakota. I was one of those Virginians years ago. I went first to the Navajo Reservation, in Arizona. Later I went – at far less expense – to Southwest Washington, D.C. It was an education.

I went on these mission trips because I had been taught that I was privileged by wealth and social status. Although a seventh-generation Virginian I was raised in Arlington, which was and is one of the most affluent suburbs in the country. I was taught that we should serve those who had need, defined as the materially poor, usually non-white.

What I did not know was that I was looking for myself. What I did not know was that I was desperately poor, and that I was being invited to find God's wealth.

The quest for material wealth is one of the major themes of Virginia from the earliest days: the seizing of native land, white slavery, black slavery, segregation. Then, after the Second World War, there was an enormous, unprecedented economic expansion which made it possible to dream of a nation which was all at least middle income. We now know that our nation maintained this dream by controlling, at one point, 60 percent of the monetized wealth of the world. It is not so today, and it will never be so again. The receding waters of financial boom have placed all but a few - those profiting from the changes - in a defensive position.

There is, we may learn, a poverty of spirit in wealth. Generosity and constructive citizenship do not always accompany the financial ability to give and serve. The poverty - the insensitivity -- of material wealth is high-percentage, subtle, devastating. And the risk of this insensitivity is inevitable. It cannot be avoided, because almost no sane person chooses the alternative - the insecurity of genuine financial poverty. Simple living is one thing; it is quite another to be unable to pay your bills or provide for your children.

Material poverty guarantees instability. But instability can be the opportunity for a serious form of mutual interdependence among people, for the development of true gratitude, for joy in simple celebration, for a powerful sense of the contingency of all things, and for the essential need to live one day at a time. Generosity is stunning, but often comes almost naturally to the poor. Hospitality is a personal pleasure and honor where there is a shortage of material wealth.

This has nothing to do with the glorification of poverty or human need. Material poverty is often horrible. The disparity of material wealth in the world and the redistribution of God's universal wealth upwards is inexcusable.

But we are telling another story - the story of the search for true wealth.

The problem is poverty. If moral and spiritual poverty were not so often the unintended consequence of affluence, there would be far less desperate material poverty. Truly wealthy people feel solidarity with the poor. But true wealth is not the same thing as material wealth.

Material goods take the place of other things. Material goods demand attention and care. We purchase them first out of need, and then out of hope or anticipation of the spiritual wealth they will bring - some pleasure, joy, fulfillment of need. In order to purchase them, we seek income which may take us more time in work. Having bought the materialistic assumptions, our quest for wealth consumes more of our energy and constricts our relational and personal lives. We seek the same opportunities for our children, and sacrifice relationship time to insure their educational and career success. In all of this, there is a constriction, a small-makingness, that we can feel but not quite define.

The anxiety of material wealth is hidden just under the surface. The larger the capital platform, the larger the income commitments which our way of life commands - to live in a certain neighborhood, deal with certain schools, dress and adorn ourselves at a certain level - and the deeper the anxiety. The whole thing is fragile and isolating. On the tower of affluence, the ground is a long way away. We may not be aware of this. But our voting patterns will surely show it, and our social and political behaviors may well reflect it.

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TENDING THE SPIRIT

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Segregating the poor by denying public transportation, segregating schools by jurisdiction, enacting horribly regressive taxation, and creating service districts in which only those of higher income live, is not just, not Christian – but we justify it by reasoning which feeds on that deep and hidden anxiety that our wealth might be lost, our fragile satisfaction upended.

Aware that we somehow have made it better for ourselves than for others, or at least have profited from unintended inequality, and unconsciously suffering from the smallness which material wealth imposes, we seek to do our part to remedy the situation. We take mission trips.

What we do not ever really believe is that we are the poor. Then we are confronted, almost inevitably, by a wealth that has no source but spirit, a hospitality which exceeds the greatest catered banquet we could provide, a gratitude which explodes out of the material poverty from which it comes.

In the process, we may come to re-examine what we have done, and what we must do, not primarily for the welfare of others – although that is true, too – but for our own soul's welfare.

The quest for wealth is nothing less than the quest for the Kingdom of God. Wealth is a state of abundance which has no material indicators. You know when you are wealthy, and you know most clearly when it has nothing to do with that great material and monetary quest which drives and holds us.

There is often a poverty in wealth, often a wealth in poverty. In the unpacking of that mystery God is known, the Kingdom is born, and the world will be healed.

*The Rev. B. P. Campbell
Pastoral Director*

KINGDOM ARCHITECTURE

Building Together

The weight of psychic residue concerning race carried by our local community and our larger society is heavy. At times it makes us wonder if building together is possible. Many of us have been socialized to believe that separation is natural and inevitable. The project of establishing a racial hierarchy was anchored in the fiction that only Europeans contributed to the construction of this society and its culture. Reality is significantly different.

Nearly 25 years ago, historian Mechal Sobel challenged traditional assumptions about the one-way transfer of culture from white to black in the British North American colonies. She courageously questioned the validity of the notion that two different cultures developed “naturally” in America, one white and one black. She showed that in the lived culture of the eighteenth-century, there was a startling degree of integration between similar cultural ideas and attitudes.

According to Sobel, interpenetration of African and English values started in the late seventeenth-century with the mass importation of blacks into the southern colonies. She asserted that among both blacks and whites, beliefs were closer to medieval Catholicism than elite Anglicanism or Puritanism. She pointed out that even if whites were oblivious to similarities in values and attitudes and unaware of the changes close interaction made in them, the impact was profound.

Sobel examined attitudes about time, space, and death in colonial Virginia through the institutions of family and church. She used diaries, letters, church records, and artifacts of material culture. She concluded that blacks and whites were thoroughly intermixed in a deep symbiotic relatedness in the period before slavery became rigidly color-coded. And, that the Great Awakening marked the climax of extensive, intensive interaction of blacks with whites. The title of her book is *The World They Made Together*.

Building together is possible. Let's be careful how we build.

*The Rev. Delmarshae Sledge
Associate Pastor*

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