

“Learning From God’s Favorites”
Amos 5:14-15/Luke 6:20-23

Today marks the start of a new program year at DPC. After months of canceled events and virtual-only options for most facets of church life, we are finally starting to re-emerge. We have worshiped inside the sanctuary since May, music rehearsals just resumed, Club 456 met four days ago for the first time and youth do so tonight, the Senior Adult Ministry retreat starts on Tuesday and educational offerings next Sunday. It feels good, and while we will still do our part to limit the spread of COVID and adapt as need be, we all hope to stay on this path for good!

Among the other parts of church life that unfolded during the pandemic has been our Matthew 25 initiative. Its name comes from the gospel book and chapter bearing that number when Jesus says in caring “for the least of these who are my brothers and sisters” we care for him. In February last year, our Session voted for DPC to join the Matthew 25 effort that includes more than 1000 congregations across the PCUSA. The next month, in their first virtual meeting, our officers created a task force of representatives from committees and two at-large members of the church to recommend a proposed emphasis. After six months of prayer and study, listening and exploration, that group suggested and the Session approved a church-wide focus on dismantling systemic racism and its intersectionality with poverty. The task force was charged with creating a plan to ensure that our work moving ahead is focused, coordinated, and non-partisan and one of their first efforts were some wonderful events here during Black History Month. The next project was also educational as many of you participated in the Racial Wealth Gap simulation over the summer. A week from today, we begin the next phase.

We are calling it “All Aboard Our Matthew 25 Journey.” The train imagery comes from a discovery our team made suggesting that Silas Andrews, the longest-serving pastor in DPC’s history and the man for whom the building behind me is named may have provided shelter for those escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. I love the idea that one of my predecessors may have used our manse in the battle against the clearest form of structural racism in American history. Next Sunday, we will experience the first stop of “All Aboard” as we hear from a re-enactor who is the third cousin of Harriet Tubman, one who was known as the “Underground Railroad Conductor.” In the months ahead, our M25 team will provide other creative ways to learn and respond. Thus, I’d like to use today’s sermon and next week’s to explore what our Matthew 25 effort is and is not, along with my own hopes for it. We start with the second part of our focus, the intersection of poverty with that work, and begin, as always, with Scripture.

Our Old Testament reading makes a clear connection between justice and poverty, yet before hearing Amos’ words, there are three points I’d like to make. First, his ministry took place when Israel was at the height of its territorial expansion and prosperity. Life was good, but not for all. In addition, that prophet was from Judah, but spent most his ministry in Israel. Put differently, he was from the south and yet most his preaching occurred in the north, which leads this southern boy to view him as a kind of spiritual cousin! Yet most importantly for our text, it’s helpful to know that cities of Israel were surrounded by walls and at the point where they met there would be an overlap of perhaps 40 feet—about the distance between the signs to my left and right—with the two walls about the same distance apart between an outer and inner gate. It was there that court cases were heard as someone with a complaint would assemble ten jurors.

“Hate evil and love good” Amos says, “and establish justice in the gate.” Scholars tell us that a frequent act of injustice then was by landowners toward the farmers who worked the soil. The landlord often charged exorbitant rental rates for use of the land and took more than their

share of the crop. The practical impact was to keep the farmers in poverty. When joined with the regular practice of judges accepting bribes that favored the wealthy Amos declared that such injustice had to stop, in part, because of God's abiding concern for the poor

Just this week, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the 2020 poverty rate. Our government defines poverty as present when household income is \$26,250 or less for a family of four. Last year, 11.4 percent of Americans were at or below that level. The stimulus payments under the Trump Administration moved 12 million people temporarily out of poverty, which means that the actual rate last year was 9.1 percent, the lowest on record. Using the government's definitions of race, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites was 8.2%, for Asians 8.1%, for Hispanics 17.0 and Blacks at 19.5--in other words the last two groups more than twice the rate for whites. Such numbers are clear, but Thomas Sowell, an economist and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University makes a convincing argument that governmental and political, social and cultural factors also shape such statistics and that we should not attribute all of the disparities to race. (Sowell, Thomas *Discrimination and Disparities*. New York: Basic Books, 2019). Such counsel seems wise to me as we seek to discern the intersection between poverty and race.

We are engaged in that work not primarily because our Session or denomination thought it a good idea, but because Jesus made clear the poor were a primary focus of his ministry. In his first sermon (Luke 4:16f) Jesus preached from the text heard in our call to worship when Isaiah says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he had anointed me to bring good news to the poor." Our New Testament reading which begins his next sermon, continues with that theme.

"Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.'" Those words mark the start to what is known as the Sermon on the Plain. Unlike the more familiar Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, Luke's account is briefer and has a different feel. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but here says "Blessed are you who are poor." One scholar offers a helpful perspective on that point of distinction when he writes, "[Jesus'] blessing of the poor neither idealizes nor glorifies poverty, [Rather] it declares God's prejudicial commitment to the poor." (Culpepper, R. Alan, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 143).

As part of my clergy renewal leave three years ago, I spent two weeks in South Africa. My reason for going was two-fold. I had long heard about the natural beauty of that country, and in particular, Kruger National Park, where you are in a car while lions, elephants, giraffes and more roam freely all around. It was even better than imagined and when joined with other stops in that country where I got my first glimpse of the Indian Ocean and stood at the Cape of Good Hope, the most south-western point of Africa, it definitely fed the wander-lust of this unrepentant fan of travel. Yet the greater motivation for journeying there was to understand more about a sad chapter of shared history between that country and the part of the U.S. where I grew up.

I don't have any memory of segregated water fountains or movie theaters as a boy, but well remember that the first six years of my formal education in Georgia occurred in all-white public schools. A pastor who had preceded my father by about a decade in the congregation they both served in Columbus had been forced out after a *Look* magazine article in which he had said simply that whites needed to do a better job of listening to their black neighbors. South Africa, of course, had its own chapter of structural racism known as apartheid and I learned in my reading that some of the officials who helped enact those requirements had drawn from words of an Atlanta publisher as further rationale for why it was the way to go in their country, too. Yet in addition to that shared history, our denomination's newest addition to its *Book of Confessions* is the Confession of Belhar which was adopted by the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa

35 years ago as a direct word against apartheid. Thus, I also decided to travel to that country to learn more about all of those personal and faith intersections. The trip achieved that goal as well.

Before leaving, I had the privilege of visiting with Dirkie Smit, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who, in 1982 was a 29-year-old instructor in South Africa attending a synod meeting of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. As part of that gathering in the Cape Town suburb of Belhar it was decided a new confession needed to be written and even though he was too modest to say so, my own perspective is that Dr. Smith wrote the vast majority of it by himself in one day. He shared with me all kinds of behind-the-scenes insights including that the most debated line in the Confession of Belhar is the one that declares, “*God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged.*” In other words, my own words, that the poor of this world might be understood as God’s favorites.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey built upon that idea by noting “a phenomenon found throughout both the Old and New Testaments: God’s partiality toward the poor and disadvantaged. *Why would God single out the poor for special attention over any other group?*” Yancey wondered and then cited a writer named Monika Hellwig who listed ten so-called advantages to being poor. Among them, she says “The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption...The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another...The poor rest their security not on things but on people...The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated reality because they have so little to lose and are ready for everything.”

After citing Hellwig’s complete list, Yancey concludes “through no choice of their own—[even though] they may urgently wish otherwise—poor people find themselves in a posture that befits the grace of God. In their state of neediness, dependence, and dissatisfaction with life, they may welcome God’s free gift of love.” (Yancey, Philip *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995, p. 115)

If that is true, then it suggests to me that one of the blessings of our Matthew 25 journey is that it will give those of us who do not meet the standard for poverty the opportunity to learn something more about God from those who do. Which makes this train ride one with the potential to transform many lives, including our own.