

2022 10 16 – Good News

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21
Luke 14:15-24 (The Inclusive Bible)

Last Sunday the question on CBC's Cross Country Checkup was "Is the minimum wage enough to make ends meet where you live? What does it mean for your budget or your business?" It was a fascinating discussion and certainly timely as the minimum wage has recently gone up here in Saskatchewan.

As of October 1st, the minimum wage in Saskatchewan is now \$13.00 per hour. This was a substantial increase of more than a dollar from the previous wage but it still leaves us with the lowest minimum wage in all of Canada. In neighbouring Alberta, for example, the minimum wage is \$15 for general workers and \$13 for students under 18. In Manitoba it is \$13.50 and Ontario \$15.50.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimum_wage_in_Canada

The reality is that none of these wages are enough to move people over the poverty line. One Saskatchewan organization calculates that a family of four would require a living wage of over \$16.00 to live in either of the largest cities in this province. The living wage reflects what people need to support their families based on the actual costs of living in a specific community. There are, of course, lots of people in this province attempting to live on even less than minimum wage, people such as: retirees, those on disability or social assistance.

<https://policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/news-releases/living-wage-regina-1623hour-saskatoon-1689-hour-report>

Poverty is not a new issue. It has existed for thousands of years. In today's readings from the Gospel of Luke we hear Jesus talking about this issue. At the very start of his ministry, Jesus stood before the people in his home village of Nazareth and read from the book of Isaiah saying,

The Spirit of our God is upon me:
Because the Most High has anointed me
to bring Good News to those who are poor.

Jesus went on to read about freedom and healing for the captive, the blind and the imprisoned and then he sat down.

In those days the speaker in the synagogue preached while seated. The congregation waited with bated breath to hear what this local boy was going to say. I don't know what they were expecting, but I'm sure it wasn't this proclamation, "Today, in your hearing this scripture passage is fulfilled." Jesus was telling his family, his school teachers, his neighbours that he was the one that God had sent to save the people of Israel, and, in particular, to save those who were living in poverty, those who were sick and those who were imprisoned. His mission, his ministry was to bring good news to the poor!

But what does good news for the poor look like? We know that Jesus spent a significant amount of his time connecting with those on the margins. He healed the sick, ate with the tax collector and talked to the woman at the well. And we also know that Jesus spent a lot of time teaching. He taught using parables and lots of his parables were about money and the poor.

The story I have chosen for today is often called, “The Parable of the Great Dinner.” In this parable a rich man plans a large banquet and invites many of his friends and acquaintances. Once the meal is ready it seems that everyone is busy and, at the last minute, they all decline his invitation. So the landowner tells his employee to, “Go into town, into the streets and alleys, and bring in those who are poor or crippled, and those who are blind or lame.” The landowner has his aide search until his table is full.

The amazing thing about parables is there are so many ways to interpret and understand them. None of the parables are simple stories with just one moral. They are all complicated and challenging. Many of you have probably heard sermons about this parable where the landowner is God, the dinner is the kingdom of heaven and we are the people with invitations who excuse ourselves when it is time to sit at God’s table. Where the moral of the story is that we should never be too busy to answer a call from God. This is a perfectly fine interpretation, but it’s not the only one.

What if, rather than a guest, you put ourselves in the position of the landowner in this story? What if you are the one who is having the dinner party and suddenly your guests are unable to attend? What would you do? Have you ever been put in this situation? What’s a possible solution? (wait for answers) Would you be comfortable going out and, at the last minute, inviting the welfare recipient, the person on disability or the family in city housing living on minimum wage? Would you even know who to contact or where to go? I know I would struggle with that.

Maybe Jesus tells this parable to illustrate the brokenness of our communities, the great divide that exists between the wealthy and the poor. Maybe he is trying to show us that charity and pity toward others are no substitute for dignity and equality. I believe Jesus' is turning this story upside down. I believe that Jesus' good news is that the poor are not second string guests, invited to save face and honor for a snubbed host, but that they should be, and are, the invited guests

We could argue that here at First United we already invite the poor to our table. We give out Christmas hampers, we support the food bank, we give baked goods and other food to the CMHA. And with our Loose Change Suppers, soon to begin again, we invite everyone to dinner. That is true. But wouldn't it be even better if everyone had the dignity of being able to offer some payment for their meal? Wouldn't it be even better if there were no people in this city going hungry and needing a hand out?

I believe Jesus' good news to the poor is about the eradication of poverty, the elimination of the need for charity. What would it be like if we all sat as equals at the same table? What would it be like if we took all the money that is raised across this country to feed and house the poor and, instead, we used that money to ensure that everyone had a livable wage?

One of the people who phoned in last Sunday made a statement that really made me stop and think. He noted that the owners of some businesses were suggesting that increasing the minimum wage would threaten their company's

very existence. And then he said, and I'm paraphrasing because I don't remember the exact words, "if a company's business model is built on paying their employees a wage that keeps them, and their families, below the poverty line, then maybe that company and that business model shouldn't exist." It is something to think about, isn't it? In order to make Jesus' good news for the poor a reality we are being called to do more than just feed the hungry. We are being called to fight for justice. We are being called to invite everyone to the table, a table of mutuality and dignity. May it be so. Amen.