

Hespeler, 17 November, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 65:17-25, Isaiah 12, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

In 1974, news and magazine stories began to appear about a woman named Linda Taylor in the United States. She was, apparently, quite a phenomenon. She didn't work and collected welfare. In fact, it seemed, she collected a lot of welfare. In fact, she was eventually convicted of illegally obtaining 23 welfare checks using two aliases and was sentenced to prison. It was in these articles that a special name was coined for her and people like her, a welfare queen.

A few years later, in his campaign to become president of the United States, Ronald Reagan took that term, welfare queen, and kind of ran with it. At his campaign rallies and speeches, the welfare queen became a regular feature. Linda Taylor was not just one person, in fact, he never mentioned her by name. She was but one example of many. Welfare queens were apparently everywhere, they were bleeding America dry and they were at the heart of everything that was wrong with America. Reagan never actually offered any proof or statistics about any of this, he just confidently proclaimed it and you had to believe it; he was so sincere. People certainly did believe him.

And thus, after coming to office, Reagan had a mandate to carry out welfare reform – something that quickly caught on and spread to many other places including Canada. The idea behind it was that welfare was not only a drain on public funds, it also actually harmed the poor people that it was supposed to help. It encouraged them to be lazy, to give up control over their own lives and led them into the fraud and crime represented by the welfare queen. The solution, therefore, was to stop giving welfare to people, at least not without requirements – especially the requirement that they had to work. This was not presented as something mean-hearted or cruel, but actually a kind of tough love, a way of doing what was best for people even though they might not like it.

At that time, and often afterwards, the scripture that was used by Christian supporters of these initiatives was the one that we read this morning from the Second Letter of Thessalonians. **“For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”** I am not sure, of course, that when Paul wrote those words what he had in mind was everything that happened with welfare reform. I do rather suspect that he was speaking pretty specifically to particular problems that were happening in that church in Thessalonica and not necessarily putting forward general principles. And I am not entirely sure that welfare reform has been an unmitigated success over the last few decades, but I do agree



Of Vineyards and Welfare Queens

that there is some wisdom in this general idea. Setting aside particular circumstances, of course, I do think that people have a natural need to contribute to their own sustenance and well-being, to do so is to fulfill what you are called to be as a human being.

And yet, at the same time, I believe that the Bible would invite us to look a little bit deeper when we are thinking of problems like poverty and people being unable to eat. I am particularly drawn to our reading this morning from the Prophet Isaiah. It is a famous passage in which the prophet lays out his vision of the world as it will be someday. It is a vision of peace and hope for all peoples. So peaceful is this world that the prophet describes that **“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”** In other words, the peacefulness of the human world will overflow into the natural world until even predator and prey can dwell alongside each other.

But there is another element in this vision of a world perfected that may be even more important. Isaiah goes on to say: **“They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat... and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain.”**

Think about that for a few moments. Think about the contrast between that and the **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,”** that we find in Second Thessalonians and in the world of welfare reform. When the prophet comes to imagine the perfect world, he doesn't imagine a world where people don't have to work. In fact, the people in this vision seem to be working very hard – building houses, planting vineyards and generally toiling all day long. The difference in this vision is that the people are working for themselves. It is *their* house, *their* vineyard and the work of *their* hands that they themselves are enjoying.

They are intimately connected to the work that they do and the outcome of their labour. There is no question that they will work. If they do not work, their vineyard or their field will not produce. Nobody has to tell them that those who do not work do not eat. If work has meaning and people are able to enjoy the fruits of their labour, you're not going to see too many problems with people shirking work that just needs to be done.

So that is the ideal vision of the world as it is supposed to be that you find, not just in this passage in Isaiah but in many places in the Old Testament. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that that is how God designed us to live, with a close connection between the work that we do and the resulting production that provides for us life and sustenance. Under those conditions, I'm not saying that everything was perfect, but at least the connection between labour and being able to eat was not something that anybody could miss.

But then guess what happened, the world changed. It had already changed quite significantly by the time that Paul was writing his letters to the Thessalonians. The growth of slavery and the large-scale movement of people

from the countryside into cities like Thessalonica, meant that entire generations of people had lived without ever seeing how their work produced anything of value to themselves.

Other people had seized control of things, like the land, that were able to produce what people needed and they only worked for those demanding masters, employers and patrons. Is it any wonder that there were some people in the church in Thessalonica who got carried away with the new freedom that they found in Christ and decided not to do any work because they didn't have anyone forcing them to work? They had lost that connection and could no longer see how their failure to contribute impacted the whole community.

And if *they* struggled with the effects of that loss of connection, how much more has that become a problem for us in the modern world? We live in a society today where most people have become completely unaware of where the things that sustain them come from. Pork chops on styrofoam trays just appear on grocery shelves, fruit comes in rolls by the foot and who has a clue what Rice Krispies are made of? And the labour of very few is connected in any meaningful way to the production that sustains their lives. For the most part, we work to serve the profits of companies and corporations. We may live in fear that, if we don't work or we can't get a job, we won't eat, but we no longer have a clear sense of how it is all connected.

Part of this, of course, just has to do with the complexities of modern life and modern economics. You do almost need a degree in economics these days to map out the chains of production and consumption, supply and demand. But it also does have something to do with how we have chosen to distribute the ownership of those things, like wealth and land and resources, that are the things that are able to provide to human beings what they need to survive. When these things are increasingly controlled by an elite few, you are bound to have problems as people fall into apathy, idleness and poverty.

This also has to do with what we truly value because everything in our economy seems to be screaming these days that we don't really value work. Those who contribute their capital, their investment and their ownership generally expect to receive a much higher rate of return these days than those who merely contribute their labour. What is more, labourers are often seen as expendable – the first to get cut when there is any danger that profits will fall.

Now, before you all start to think that I am going to go off and start quoting from the Communist Manifesto here, let me say that I am not an idealist when it comes to economic systems. I know that we live in a capitalist society and I am okay with that. I don't think capitalism is perfect – it certainly has some pitfalls – but I am not inclined to overturn it, though I'd like to see it work better for everyone. I'm not preaching economic systems here, I am just preaching what the Bible preaches, and that is economic justice.

Prophets like Isaiah really did dream of a world where every family lived under their own vine and their own fig tree, where they had the means to produce what they needed to live with their own hands and the work that they

did all had meaning as a result. I know that we no longer live in a world where that is possible, but I still believe that we can be informed by that biblical vision and it can have an impact on how we deal with people today.

One thing I know is this: it doesn't help when we simply treat people as categories and problems. In my work, I have often had time to deal with people who are unemployed or underemployed and don't earn enough to live on. I know that it doesn't help to categorize them as welfare queens or even as problems. I have known people who don't work for various reasons, but few have been what I would call lazy. They may have issues that have not been resolved or injuries of mind or of body that are unhealed. They may have never been taught or given what they needed to be able to work and they may have missed out on certain opportunities, but they aren't simply lazy, and I don't really see what it helps anything to treat them as such.

People are not categories, they are people. They need to be treated as people. And if you take the time to get to know them and really listen to them (which may take a lot of time because they have often built up barriers around themselves) they may just let you in and you will see.

That is honestly one of the things that I really appreciate about the outreach ministries that we have here at St. Andrew's. I know that we do give a whole lot of people free meals, extremely subsidised food to take home through the food bank and free clothing through Hope Clothing. But honestly, I do not think that these things are the most important services that we provide for people who live on the economic margins. We offer them a place and a context where they are treated as individuals. We sit beside them as they eat their meals, we enjoy their company as they select their food or clothing. We actually take the time to get to know them and their struggles and trials. I'm not saying that doing that will suddenly fix all of the problems in somebody's life or enable them to make the jump to an excellent job tomorrow, but I am saying that it is in those kinds of personal connections that healing begins.

The problem is not that our welfare systems were too generous. Yes, there probably was some need of reform and improvements, but it is not true at all that welfare is a driver of poverty. The problem, you see, went much deeper than that. The problem was disconnection – disconnection from the land, disconnection from the means of production. We are not going to fix all of that simply by cutting people off even more from compassion and care, the solution and the hope is to be found in connection and that is something that we can all be part of.

You, simply by choosing to treat an unemployed or marginalized person as a person – by caring about them and their story – are part of the hope and the healing, part of the vision of God for what this world could truly be.