

World Hunger Sunday

Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:1-11

By Pastor John H. Noordhof

Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church

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Morning Service

People of God: On Tuesday the Ottawa Citizen had a front page picture of a newborn baby, with the caption, “And Baby makes Seven Billion.” It was determined by one of the United Nation’s agencies that the world’s population would turn 7 billion people on October 31. How accurate that figure is, is known only to God. But throughout the world, various babies were chosen to symbolize the 7th billion human being now alive on Planet Earth.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? On the one hand, each newborn usually means a joyous event for someone. Each newborn is created in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. We’ve had our share of newborns in the last few years and it has been a blessing to our congregation.

On the other hand, can this world support 7 billion people? That’s a lot of mouths to feed! Are we capable of providing for the needs of that many people? Just as individual families limit the number of children they have, is there a limit to the number of people this world can support?

In the debates over these questions, the name of Thomas Malthus is mentioned. He lived in the late 1700’s in Great Britain. He warned that the rising population would soon outpace food production so that famine and other social disasters loomed on the horizon. He was completely wrong.

But in the 1960’s, similar concerns were raised. In 1968, Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, warning of mass starvation in the decades to come. He was wrong, as the Green Revolution allowed a country like India to become self-sufficient in food. Yet he still maintains we’re heading towards disaster. Especially now that we’re at 7 billion people.

Is there a limit to the number of people this world can handle? How do we feed 7 billion people? How do we improve the quality of life for the bottom billion people, who do not have access to clean water, adequate food, basic health, and some form of education?

Add into this discussion, the ongoing debt crisis and the issues become very complicated. While the debt crisis is a problem of the developed countries, it is the poor within each country and the developing countries that will be most severely affected.

The 2008 recession was triggered by too much personal debt. In particular it was the defaults in the US housing market that led to banks collapsing. Personal debt is still a major concern. If it wasn't for the low interest rates, many Canadians would be in deep trouble. Canadians have stretched themselves too thin.

Now we have the issue of the debts of countries. Not of some third world country, but of European countries, like Greece, whose default could spell the end of the Euro zone and usher in another recession. South of the border, the Americans have had to raise their debt ceiling to over a trillion dollars. And as, for Canada, we too have major debts problems. Ontario, alone pays 9.8 billion dollars a year to service our debt, without lowering the debt a single penny. This is clearly unsustainable.

And so the spending habits of the developed world are coming home to roost. As governments are forced to balance the books, there will be tough choices. There will be pain. In the long run, getting the budget in order will be to everyone's benefit. But in the short term, it may mean the most vulnerable become even more vulnerable. When the economies of the developed countries go into a tailspin, it's the developing countries that often suffer the most.

It's no wonder we see these "Occupy" movements spread from Wall Street to Ottawa and other cities in our world. However misguided they may be, they seek to give voice to the concerns of ordinary people, wanting to make sure that the rich and the elite pay their fair share for the mess the corporate elite have created. They reflect the discontent people have with the present state of affairs.

But what's a Christian response to all of this? How do we feed 7 billion people? How do we get our economic house in order? These are complex questions, for which I do not have a quick and instant answer—if I did I'd run for political office.

I'm not an economist, but as a preacher of the Word, I am called to bring a Christian perspective to these questions. While the Word of God may not offer specific policies for a 21st century economy, the Word of God does offer some basic principles and perspectives that ought to shape economic policies.

For you see, the Christian response is not one of indifference to the economic, social, and political issues of our time. It's not as if the Christian

faith offers an escape from the problems of the world, or that we are merely interested in the saving of souls.

If we truly believe God is the Creator of all and that this is our Father's world; if we truly believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, through whom all things were made and through whom all things are reconciled (see Colossians 1); if we truly believe the creation itself will be liberated, as we considered last week, then the Biblical message will shape our views on the issues of our times—from population growth to the debt crisis.

Admittedly, Christians may end up having different policy recommendations to specific problems. But hopefully, Christians can agree on some basic principles and perspectives that ought to guide us as we consider these things. We are called to seek justice and pursue righteousness so that our world can experience peace, shalom.

That's the long-term vision of the Bible. It is a goal ultimately achieved through Jesus in the new creation. But as we pray "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth", we are called to implement that vision and to work towards that goal in our lives and in our world. It's an immense and daunting task.

Our Scripture reading from Deuteronomy 15 gives us one glimpse into the biblical picture. A good portion of the book of Deuteronomy describes how God's people were to live in the Promised Land. They were to create a society in which the worship of God affected every aspect of their lives—including how they were to deal with the poor in their midst.

In this passage, we are presented with the ideal, as well as with a realistic assessment of what can be done to alleviate poverty in the land. On the one hand, the ideal is presented in verse 4: "there should be no poor among you." That's the goal. In a perfect world, where justice and righteousness reign, there will be no poor.

The passage offers two reasons why there should be no poor in the land. First of all, the Lord will bless the people so that they will all have what they need. The Lord has indeed given us the creation, with its rich and bountiful resources to be able to supply the needs of all his image bearers—even if today that number is 7 billion.

Second, there were policies to allow people to re-start their lives, after economic failure. These policies focused on forgiving debts every seven years. Implicit is a recognition that long-term debt is debilitating and prevents people from getting out of poverty. So provisions were made to release people from their debt.

On the other hand, these policies concede that in reality there will be poor people. As verse 11 mentions: "There will always be poor people in the

land.” A verse Jesus also quotes in the NT. Because we do not live in a perfect world, even in OT Israel, where all the people were to worship the Lord and have this desire to pursue justice and righteousness, there was a recognition that the ideal of “no poor” would not be realized.

As a result, there were these policies to help the poor to re-start. In addition, these verses urge God’s people to be generous. As verse 11 concludes: “Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

And so, Deuteronomy 15 presents us the ideal, as well as a realistic assessment of what might actually be achieved. Now this policy of canceling debt every seven years cannot simply be transferred to today’s economy. We need to realize this applied to OT Israel, not to a diverse 21st century world. It was part of the Mosaic covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But that does not mean they have no bearing on us today. The concerns of this passage remain, but now re-applied in the light of Jesus. The basic principles of striving to overcome poverty; a recognition of the debilitating effects of debt, the call to be generous and openhanded. Surely, these points resonate today as they did back in ancient Israel.

So how might these points be applied for us today? Perhaps, we need to properly identify those who are really poor. The initial slogan of the Occupy movement is that they represent the 99%, while the extreme rich of the corporate elite are the 1% and they are not paying their fair share. But who really are the 1%? In terms of the point, the protestors are making: they are part of the 1%. We are the 1%. When viewed on the global scale.

Oh maybe that’s not fully accurate. After all, 1% of 7 billion people is 70 million people. Might a few of us be part of the richest 70 million in the world? Maybe, maybe not. But if we think of the top 10% of the world, 700 million—yes, I’ll say we’re part of that. Including the protestors, who can get water, food, warm clothing, heaters, and pallets for the Occupation. The truly poor in our world—the bottom billion—do not have those things.

And so, we need recognize what true poverty is. We also need to recognize that the overall standard of living for everyone in this world is improving. This is a fact that is often underplayed in the media. After all, bad news seems to create better headlines than good news. But overall, there are far fewer people in absolute poverty today, both in terms of a percentage of world population, as well as in real numbers. Yes, a great deal more can and needs to be done, but we also need to recognize the gains that have been made. We need to understand why and how those gains were made and try to apply them to other areas of the world.

For example, China and India—the two most populous nations on earth—have dramatically improved the standard of living for their people in the last forty years. How? By adopting free market policies.

There also needs to be a recognition that debt is a big issue. As Deuteronomy 15 implies: debt is debilitating. It's a noose that threatens future growth and stability. That's true for both personal and government debt. We cannot spend and spend. Someone has to pay or else the whole system will collapse. And if that happens, we'd really be in trouble. And so, we need to learn to live within our means, personally and our government. That means some tough choices will have to be made.

Often that means the vulnerable become more vulnerable. The weakest become weaker. But since we reject the idea of the survival of the fittest mentality, as Christians we are called to be generous and openhanded, to help those who may fall between the "cracks", to reach out to those who hurting, to step in when there are acute crises—like we see in east Africa, and to advocate for long term policies to create wealth and opportunity for everyone—so that all 7 billion people will be able to enjoy the blessings of God's good creation.

While there may always be poor people in the land, we are called to seek justice, to pursue righteousness, so that peace can be experienced, longing for the day when there will be no more poor people in the kingdom of our God. Amen.