

'THERE WAS NOT A NEEDY PERSON AMONG THEM' THE CALL FOR A LIVING WAGE

SECOND SUNDAY IN EASTER, YEAR B

Lectionary Texts: Psalm 133 John 20:19-31 Acts 4:32-35 I John 1:1-2:2

Focus Text: Acts 4:32-35

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

NRSV

Additional Texts

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever. Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human.

Psalm 9:18-20

There are those whose teeth are swords, whose teeth are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mortals.

Proverbs 30:14

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.

Deuteronomy 24:14

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages.

Jeremiah 22:13

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

James 5:1-4

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

by Rev. Denise Cumbee Long, Program Associate, N.C. Council of Churches

In America, we cherish our Bill of Rights and our tradition of individualism. We are known as the land where individual freedoms are protected, and where personal initiative can take us as far as we dare to go. Recent welfare reform laws emphasize how each family is responsible for itself first and foremost. Society, through its most common united effort (government), will help--but only for a while and in limited ways.

Interestingly, our biblical tradition does not have this emphasis on the supremacy of the individual. The common good is the dominant motif. Examples abound of built-in social mechanisms meant to reduce extremes of wealth and poverty, so that everyone has enough. Jewish tradition required farmers to leave a portion of grain in their fields, so the sojourners might freely pick and eat. Leviticus 25 outlines the concept of jubilee, Israel's mechanism for shrinking the gap between the wealthy and the debt-ridden poor, as such disparities were considered unhealthy for the community as a whole.

The early Christians described in Acts 4:32-35 likewise understood that a cohesive, healthy community could only happen when the basic needs of all were met and the dignity of each person respected. Only when the common good was protected could members of a community be "united, heart and soul."

The Bible speaks of the importance of paying workers a fair wage. In Biblical times, many workers were real "day laborers," paid at the end of the day for that day's work. For the poor, then as now living almost literally from hand to mouth, not to receive pay at the end of the day could well mean not eating the next day. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 recorded God's law that poor workers should be paid at the end of the day of labor. Note that this law applied not just to others of the Hebrew family but also to foreign laborers who were there for the work. Note, too, that a violation was labeled as "sin."

The prophet Jeremiah (24:13-17) conveyed God's words of judgment on those who failed to pay their laborers. Even more seriously, this condemnation was of a king, Jehoiakim, who built himself a large palace. He was contrasted with his father, Josiah, who did justice and righteousness, and whose death was mourned by all. Jehoiakim, on the other hand, had failed to pay his workers and had practiced oppression and violence. His death was not mourned and actually led to the deportation of many from Jerusalem to Babylon (2 Kings 24).

Jesus' parable in Matthew 20:1-16 put a different twist on the question of wages. A man hired laborers early in the morning and agreed to pay them a denarius, a typical day's wage. He returned later in the day, even late in the afternoon, and continued to hire additional help, agreeing to pay them what was fair. When it came time to pass out the paychecks, everyone, including the most recent hires, got a denarius. When the early morning crew complained "We've worked all day and in the burning sun," the owner chastised them. "Haven't I given you what we agreed on? Am I not allowed to be generous with the others, if I so choose?" (From commentary in *Welfare, Work and Poverty In North Carolina, A Bible Study/Action Guide*, published by Jubilee, a project of the N.C. Council of Churches, 2000.)

PASTORAL REFLECTION by Rev. Denise Cumbee Long

Work...we need it, we spend most of the day consumed by it, and we are at a loss when we don't have it. When we do, it can be the source of both our greatest "highs" and deepest "lows." I know many people who find their identity, self-worth, and reason for being defined by their jobs. For some, the corollary to this truth is that the measure of their success in life directly corresponds to the amount of their salary.

Some would say that we live in a culture which idolizes work, that today's capitalistic society has taken the Puritan work ethic, one which praised individualism and thrift, and distorted it into a dangerous, frenzied race for "the top." Once people worked to live; now they live to work. Work is often worshipped, and one's status, intelligence, and virtue are determined by how well that work pays.

As Christians, we attempt to recapture the vision of work as related to the creating, sustaining, and transforming work of God. Our vocation is not defined simply by our paid employment. What we do at home, in churches, in our volunteer and political activities, all contribute to the "work" that embraces the whole of our lives. As Alistair Mackenzie writes, this kind of Christian vocation is not a passive one that "surrenders to the status quo, but one that will contest corruption and exploitation and work to name and resist what is evil and to transform bad circumstances." (Vocation: Historical Survey of Christian

Understandings, June 1997, www.faithwork.org.nz)

As members of One Body, we know that each part of that Body is unique, valuable, and respected. The early Christian community recognized this truth and set a system in place which protected the dignity and worth of every member, regardless of economic status. These early followers of Jesus recognized that an uneven distribution of wealth impacted the health of the whole community. One's ability to secure, or hold onto, financial resources did not elevate that person to a position of higher regard. In a society where many barriers made it extremely difficult for the poor to better their plight, the Christian community created a system which allowed every member to have basic needs met and to feel respected for his or her contribution to the whole body of believers. It was only then that they could all be "united, heart and soul."

In today's society, similar forces are at work to create great disparities between rich and poor. The worship of work and the measure of one's worth by one's salary cause a devaluation of many types of employment. People who work in textile mills, sweet potato fields, fast-food restaurants, or many other types of low-paying positions are seen as less "valuable," not as important to society at large, and indeed, even "expendable." Coupled with this devaluation of certain types of labor is the pervasive American ethos that hard work will always allow one to succeed. If someone is poor, it is simply because she is not working hard enough to pull herself (and her children) up by her own boot straps. Therefore, to be poor, by this reasoning, means that a person has been irresponsible and lazy. Also, if she has been working in one of the devalued jobs which have been labeled less important and therefore poorly paid, she is also considered unintelligent and unimportant.

The fact that North Carolina has kept the minimum wage level at \$5.15 since 1997 is a reflection of our society's buy-in to this way of thinking. Corporate profits have taken precedence over quality of life issues for the whole community. Numerous studies have shown that a person living in North Carolina simply can't survive on the income from a full-time, minimum wage job. Working hard is not enough. These same studies reveal that a living wage of \$10.60, twice the current level, is necessary just to get by. Yet, citizens and legislators have failed to step up to the plate when it comes to increasing minimum wage to a living wage standard.

In David Shipler's new book, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, he tells the story of Caroline Payne. Her face and gums are distorted because her dentures, financed by Medicaid, don't fit. Because they don't fit, she is turned down for jobs due to her appearance. She was born poor and has bounced from one poverty-wage job to another all her life. She has the will to move up, but not the resources to deal with unexpected problems like a mentally handicapped daughter, a broken marriage, a sudden layoff. Shipler writes, "In the house of the poor, the walls are thin and fragile, and troubles seep into one another."

This would make Jesus angry. It should make his followers feel righteous indignation and a determination to work for change. Over the years some have done just that. As Bill Moyers points out in his sermon, "Let's Get Jesus Back," we need to reclaim the prophetic Jesus who has been hijacked by the religious right.

"Let's get Jesus back," he writes. "The Jesus who inspired a Methodist ship-caulker named Edward Rogers to crusade across New England for an eight-hour workday...the Jesus who caused Frances William to rise up against the sweatshop...The Jesus in whose name Dorothy Day challenged the church to march alongside auto workers in Michigan, fishermen and textile workers in Massachusetts, brewery workers in New York, and marble cutters in Vermont...The Jesus who led Martin Luther King to Memphis to join sanitation workers in their struggle for a decent wage." (from an address by Bill Moyers at Riverside Church, New York City, October 4, 2004.)

It is time for Christians to reclaim our vocation in the original sense of working for a fair and just society where evil is named and oppressive structures are transformed. Our work is to acknowledge the worth and dignity of those who work beside us, whether it be in factory, field, office, or store. We work for the common good, so that we move closer to the day when we may all be "united, heart and soul."

WORSHIP AID – ‘THERE WAS NOT A NEEDY PERSON AMONG THEM’

Call to Worship

One: Worker God, whose hands built the earth, molded our bodies, and sowed the stars across the skies, we gather in your presence this morning, grateful that we can participate in the work of creation.

All: Jesus our Brother, whose hands shaped wood, healed the sick, and reached out to fishermen, laborers, and tax collectors, we gather today to follow your way of compassion and service.

One: Spirit of Love, infusing our lives with energy and meaning, grounding us in grace, we seek your renewing presence. Remind us of the world we are called to create, the dream we see before us.

All: We work with our hands and our hearts for a world where goods are shared, respect is offered to all, and justice rolls down like mighty streams.

(from Workers Rights Sabbath resources, by Edith Rasell, United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, 2003, www.ucc.org)

Prayer of Confession

Leader: We are workers, God, like you. But we confess that our work is not always done in a manner that affirms and honors each other. We confess that sometimes we blindly buy goods made by people who are paid too little or work in unsafe conditions.

People: Creator God, help us build a new world out of the ashes of the old, a world where all workers are valued.

Leader: We admit that we have failed to end an unjust system in which some workers have jobs with good wages, health insurance, sick leave, paid vacations, and pensions, while some do not make a livable wage or have no jobs at all.

People: Help us build a world where those who clean houses are also able to buy houses to live in. Help us build a world where those who grow food can also afford to eat their fill, and where those who serve us are also served by us.

Leader: O God, you offer grace and transformation. Give us the courage and strength to live out our faith in the marketplace as well as within walls of worship. We thank you that out of ashes, we can look for hope and new life. May your love be brought to life in the work of our hands as we labor for the common good.

All: Amen.

(adapted from Workers Rights Sabbath resources, by Edith Rasell, United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, 2003, www.ucc.org, with additional material written by Denise Cumbie Long.)

Suggested Hymns

- ✓ All Who Love and Serve Your City
UMH 433/TH 570/PH 413/CH 670/MW 697
- ✓ Let Justice Flow Like Streams NCH 588
- ✓ We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky CH 684/NCH 564
- ✓ O for a World PH 386/NCH 575/CH 683

w Hymnal Legend w

- † UMH – United Methodist Hymnal
- † TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
- † CH – Chalice Hymnal (DOC)
- † NCH – New Century Hymnal (ucc)
- † PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
- † MW – Moravian Book of Worship

Additional Prayers

For the Grace of Work

Loving God, we thank you for the grace of work. You create each one of us with particular talents and gifts and you call us to use them in the service of love and justice. You set before us a vision of your heaven to come to earth and you ask us to offer our work so that your vision may come to pass. You give us abundant resources so that our collective work will satisfy our individual material needs and the needs of the community to which we belong. Today, we give thanks for jobs that fulfill your intention for work. For jobs where we can use our hands to build houses of peace. For jobs where we can use our minds to explore the mysteries of the universe. For jobs where we can use our hearts to offer care to those in need. We confess, loving God, that many of us take our work for granted and turn a blind eye toward those without jobs, and those whose jobs do not pay enough for food and shelter for their families. We acknowledge our need to remember that your covenant of work assumes mutual responsibility between employee and employer so that all members of the community may be blessed and prosper. And so today, we pray for those who suffer the injustice of a job with wages insufficient to care for their family's needs. We pray for workers who earn a salary condemning them to live below the poverty level. We pray for workers forced to take two low-paying jobs to survive. We pray for workers denied the dignity of earning a living wage, "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work." Forgive us our negligence, and spur us to work for change. Remind us that in your heavenly realm the last will be first and first will be last. Let no one of us be satisfied until all our brothers and sisters earn a living wage. Move us to employ our gifts and talents so that each of us contributes to a world where all your children are paid a just and living wage for their daily work. Amen.

(prepared by Ms. Joan Malone, Coalition for Economic Justice, Buffalo, New York).

Help Us to Hear Your Word

Leader: Generous Lord, show us how to see your truth with the eyes of the prophets. Show us the way to speak for the needy among us as we stand with them in calling for a living wage.

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Isaiah said, "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance, for truth stumbles in the public square." (Isa 59:14)

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Jeremiah said, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages." (Jer 22:13)

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Amos said, "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land saying, 'we will practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweeping of the wheat.'" (Amos 8:4-6)

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Malachi said, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." (Mal 3:1)

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Mary said, "The Lord has shown strength with his arm, and scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." (Luke 1:51)

All: In your mercy, forgive us. In your grace, help us to hear your word.

Reader: Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he said, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-19, 21)

All: In our hearing, God's word will be fulfilled.

(adapted from the Mennonite Central Committee, www.mcc.org/us/washington/issues/econjustice/index.html)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

Quotes

No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country.
Franklin Delano Roosevelt

It is but a truism that labor is most productive where its wages are largest. Poorly paid labor is inefficient labor, the world over.
Henry George

"A fair day's wage for a fair day's work": it is as just a demand as governed men ever made of governing. It is the everlasting right of mankind.
Thomas Carlyle

Personal Vignettes

Profiles from Not Making It: North Carolina Voices On Jobs & Unemployment, published by the N.C. Alliance For Economic Justice, 2005.

- **Stephanie Newkirk, Kelly, North Carolina:**

After her plant shut down in 2000, Ms. Newkirk keeps a very part-time job at the Post Office....She also drives a school bus, works as a substitute teacher, and does what she can to earn enough. Still, she has no benefits and bills wait to be paid. "I am my children's only provider, so I work all I can. I can't go to the doctor to deal with things in a preventive way, so they get worse. I worry what would happen if I got sick," she says. "It's stressful living paycheck to paycheck."

- **Crystal Johnson, Elizabethtown, North Carolina**

She was hired at a rest home as a certified nursing assistant. She had one whole floor to cover by herself. And, the employer did not tell her when she was hired that she would also have to do housekeeping and laundry. All of this physical workload was for \$6.15/hour, with no benefits. She and her children had no health care, although she cared for others' health. When she spoke out at work about this, she was reprimanded.

- **Damon Thomas, Winston-Salem, North Carolina**

After serving time in prison, he was released a year ago and immediately sought employment. He now works at Wal-Mart for \$7.80/hour to get health and dental benefits he can thereby provide for his son. He says that many who end their prison terms face a giant barrier when looking for work, since many companies, especially temp services, bar ex-felons. "Rent is \$345, car insurance is \$155, child support is over \$100. I'm scraping the barrel at \$7.80/hour."

Contacts & Other Resources

- ✚ www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/economic_justice/economic_justice_issue.html - Economic Justice Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches – mission statement of the Committee: to “educate and organize people of faith in NC about economic realities in the state, and ways we can act together for fair wages, working conditions, benefits, and economic systems.” Webpage has many helpful links, including a link to the Council’s Policy Statement on the living wage issue.
- ✚ www.ncjustice.org - North Carolina Justice Center, “North Carolina’s leading private, nonprofit anti-poverty organization. Its mission is to reduce and eliminate poverty in North Carolina by helping to ensure that every North Carolina household gains access to the resources, services and fair treatment that it needs in order to enjoy economic security.” Good resource for living wage issues.
- ✚ www.livingwagecampaign.org – The Living Wage Resource Center, a website maintained by ACORN, the “Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now...[ACORN] is the nation's oldest and largest grassroots organization of low and moderate income people with over 150,000 member families organized into 800 neighborhood chapters in 65 cities across the country.”
- ✚ www.epi.org/content.cfm/issueguides_livingwage_livingwage - the Economic Policy Institute, “a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that seeks to broaden the public debate about strategies to achieve a prosperous and fair economy.” Downloadable also as a PDF file, this web page provides statistics, publications, and links to other sites.
- ✚ NC Fair Share – a grassroots multi-issue organization led by low-income North Carolinians, located in Raleigh. 919-786-7474

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- Q The living wage level is usually the wage a full-time worker would need to earn to support a family. It ranges from 100% to 130% of the federal poverty line. The wage rates specified by living wage ordinances range from a low of \$6.25 in Milwaukee to a high of \$12 in Santa Cruz.¹
- Q Minimum wage equals \$10,712 per year salary for full-time work, five days per week for 52 weeks per year. This is less than the 2005 federal poverty level for two, which is \$12,830.²
- Q One out of every three families in North Carolina (1.1 million) does not earn enough money to meet basic needs - daycare, healthcare, food, taxes, transportation, and housing.³
- Q The federal and NC minimum wages are both \$5.15 hour. If minimum wage were adjusted for inflation, it would be \$6.75.⁴

¹ Economic Policy Institute, www.epi.org/content.cfm/issueguides_livingwage_livingwagefacts.

² North Carolina Justice Center, www.ncjustice.org/media/library/357_ibminwage0505.pdf.

³ Thy Kingdom Come: A Prophetic Ministry, Office of Missions (UMC, NC Conference) & North Carolina Council of Churches, 14.

⁴ Ibid.

- q A disturbing trend contributing to the problem [of living in poverty] is that income is being distributed more unequally. Since 1979, family income (adjusted for inflation) has: declined by 0.6 percent for the lowest-income families; increased by 5.6 percent for middle-income families; and increased by 29.9 percent for the wealthiest families.⁵
- q The average annual wage of growing industries in North Carolina is 7% less than the average annual wage of the jobs leaving. This equals about \$2,000 less income per year per job. North Carolina's median income has declined almost \$3,000 per household and the poverty rate has increased.⁶
- q The living income standard has been calculated for North Carolina families, both rural and urban.

The Real Cost of Living – Living Income Standard (LIS) ⁷		
Family Consumption	Urban	Rural
One Adult, One Child	\$27,336 per annum \$13.14 per hour	\$22,884 per annum \$11.00 per hour
Two Parents, Two Children	\$39,672 per annum \$9.54 per hour	\$36,216 per annum \$8.71 per hour—each parent
Statewide Average Living Wage		\$10.60 per hour

- q Raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, which has been proposed at the national level, would mean an additional \$4,370 a year to help minimum wage earners support their families. That would help a minimum wage family to pay for:
 - o Child care,
 - o Tuition for a community college degree,
 - o Housing costs, or
 - o Groceries.
- q The North Carolina minimum wage was last raised in 1997 with House Bill 187, which effectively tied it to the federal level.
- q House Bill 330, the Living Wage Act, failed in a House vote 52-66 in June 2005. This bill would have raised the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$6.15 an hour – which still falls below the Living Income Standard. However, this bill was a step in the right direction, as it came closer to being passed in the North Carolina House of Representatives than the previous yearly attempts.

⁵ A Living Wage policy statement, adopted by the House of Delegates of the North Carolina Council of Churches, 09 November 2000, www.ncccouncilofchurches.org/resources/policystatements/livingwage.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Table from Job Loss: A Guidebook for Pastors (op. cit.)