

The Irish 'Pay It Forward' to the Navajo and Hopi

The Wired Word for the Week of May 31, 2020

In the News

Earlier this month, the women operating the Navajo and Hopi Families Covid-19 Relief Fund, a volunteer effort to get food and water to those nations' homebound elders in remote areas during the pandemic, noticed a significant increase in donations to its GoFundMe page, with almost all the new money coming from Ireland.

So strong was the uptick in contributions that Cassandra Begay, the fund's communication director, at first wondered if the website had been hacked. But eventually, they learned that the new donations started with a Twitter exchange between an Irish news reporter and a Navajo engineer.

Naomi O'Leary, European correspondent for the *Irish Times*, had tweeted, "Native Americans raised a huge amount in famine relief for Ireland at a time when they had very little. It's time for us to come through for them now." Aaron Yazzie of Los Angeles responded by tweeting the web address of the relief fund's GoFundMe page.

As of May 7, there were 20,000 Irish donors to the Navajo & Hopi Families Relief Fund, who had donated \$670,000. The fund has topped \$4 million since its inception in March.

O'Leary's reference was to an 1847 act of charity by the Choctaw Tribe, recently off the Trail of Tears and struggling to make its new home in what is now Oklahoma. After learning that the Irish were also oppressed and hungry, due to that country's notorious Potato Famine, the Choctaws, despite having few resources themselves, raised \$170 -- about \$5,000 in today's dollars -- and sent it to Ireland to help with food relief.

That \$170 was the largest donation received by the Irish during those terrible days, that saw the death from starvation and disease of one-eighth of the population.

With the donations pouring into the Navajo and Hopi Families Covid-19 Relief Fund, some might say the present-day Irish were "paying forward" the kindness the Choctaws had shown all those years ago to the Irish people of that day.

In its report of the surge of money to the Navajo and Hopi Families Covid-19 Relief Fund, *The Christian Science Monitor* said, "There were thousands of unfamiliar names appearing on the team's GoFundMe page -- the first names Siobhán, Pádraig and Aoife, or surnames O'Leary, McMullen and Gallagher -- each donating small amounts from across the Atlantic. Many posted a common Irish proverb: *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*, which means, 'In each other's shadows the people live.'"

The Navajo Nation occupies portions of northeastern Arizona, southeastern Utah and northwestern New Mexico, and has a population of about 330,000. Even before the lockdown, unemployment was at about 50 percent. As of May 19, the Navajo surpassed New York for the highest infection rate of Covid-19 in the United States. Although New York City far outpaces the Navajo Nation in the number of deaths from the virus, the rate of infection among the Navajos is higher.

According to the Navajo Department of Health, by Memorial Day, the Navajo Nation had 4,794 cases of the virus and the number of deaths from the disease was 157. Nearly 1,500 people have recovered from the disease, and Jonathan Nez, the Navajo Nation president says the "curve is flattening."

The Hopi reservation is in northeastern Arizona, surrounded by the Navajo reservation, and the governments of and organizations in the two tribes are known to work together on common problems. The 2010 census found there were 19,338 Hopi in the United States. *The Wired Word* has been unable to find any recent data regarding the Hopi infection rate and deaths from the virus.

The Irish donations ranged from \$10 to more than \$1,000. "We're so grateful to the ancestors of the Choctaw Nation for their generosity generations ago, and to the Irish people for paying it forward," said Begay. "It just goes to show the interconnectedness of everything, which is our concept of *K'e* [kinship], and that a simple act of kindness can be profound."

For her part, O'Leary said she's happy her tweet helped spark donations, but she wasn't the first one to make the connection between the long-ago Choctaw donation and the present need. "Before I wrote my tweet, Irish people had already begun sharing the fundraiser and mentioning the Choctaw donation," O'Leary wrote. "It came from the grassroots."

O'Leary explained that the Irish have long felt a kinship with Native Americans. She noted that because of Ireland's history, "Irish people identify with the oppression and dispossession of Native Americans," she noted. "When Native American people talk about the importance of preserving their land, languages and culture, that's something Irish people strongly identify with because our own heritage was nearly wiped out by colonialism."

Orla Keane, consul general at Ireland's consulate in Los Angeles, said she's been enthusiastically following the story. "I'm really delighted that the Native Americans' act of kindness over 170 years ago is remembered and that some of our people found a way to reciprocate," she said. Keane said the Choctaw incident may have been fresh in people's minds since 2017 marked the 170th anniversary of the Great Famine, and, among other events, a sculpture of a circle of giant feathers titled "Kindred Spirits" was unveiled in County Cork to mark the Choctaw contribution.

As for the Choctaws today, Casey Davis, the Choctaw tribe's director of government public relations, said her people think it's "great" that the Navajo and Hopis are now benefiting from the Choctaw's generosity back in 1847. "Any time a tribe gets help, we're happy." said Davis.

Begay, who is Navajo, said her group is planning to reach out to the Choctaw and thank them.

"Our goal is to give every Navajo and Hopi elder who needs it one two-week supply of food," she said. "We're still surging; this (virus) hasn't peaked yet. And they say it's going to come back in the fall." So far the group has helped between 2,000 and 3,000 people all over the reservation, along with several Hopi villages, according to Begay. They have also given masks made by an all-volunteer group of local seamstresses.

More on this story can be found at these links:

['In Each Other's Shadows': Behind Irish Outpouring of Relief for Navajo. *The Christian Science Monitor*](#)

[Irish 'Pay Forward' 173-year-Old Favor. Navajo Times](#)

[An Ocean Apart: Irish Donate \\$670,000 to Navajo and Hopi. Navajo-Hopi Observer](#)

[Navajo & Hopi Families Covid-19 Relief Fund. GoFundMe](#)

[Navajo Nation President Says the 'Curve Is Flattening' With Covid-19 Cases. AZ Central](#)

Applying the News Story

The expression "pay it forward" means that when something good has been done for you, you repay your benefactor not necessarily by doing something good in return to that person, but by doing good for someone else, passing the good deed *forward*, as it were. The concept was described by Benjamin Franklin back in 1784 in a letter to Benjamin Webb, where Franklin encouraged Webb to repay a debt he owned to Franklin by lending that sum to someone else, and then encouraging that person to do the same, and so on.

The term "pay it forward," first appeared in print in a 1951 sci-fi novel by Robert A. Heinlein called *Between Planets*, where one character gives another money to buy a meal, and when the recipient says he'll pay it back the first chance he gets, the donor says, "Instead, pay it forward to some other brother who needs it." The term eventually became the title of a novel by Catherine Ryan Hyde, which, in 2000, was made into a movie.

Though the pay-it-forward expression probably wasn't around in biblical times, the concept may have been, and, as we will show in the "Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope" section, some Bible passages can be read that way. So the pay-it-forward concept will be the topic of this lesson.

We want to say, however, that when finding in scripture situations resembling the pay-it-forward concept, we are not suggesting that Christianity is simply another expression of general wisdom shared with other faiths. Christianity understands God's love as the primary motivation for our charitable acts toward others -- "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Nonetheless, when talking about "pay it forward," Christianity recognizes common ground with kind and generous persons everywhere and acknowledges our human connectedness with one another.

The Big Questions

1. When have you been the recipient of an act of kindness or help where the giver was "paying forward" a kindness done to them?
2. When have you paid *forward* a kindness done for you? What, if anything, about that felt different from paying *back* the kindness?
3. In what ways is the "Golden Rule," as stated by Jesus -- "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31) -- a pay-it-forward principle?
4. *Quid pro quo* is usually defined as "a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something." In what ways is *quid pro quo* sometimes used to encourage charitable giving? In what ways is it different from "Pay it forward"?

5. You've probably heard the saying "No good deed goes unpunished." What do you think it means? What do you think Jesus would say about it? How does it relate to his command to "Take up your cross and follow me"? What do you think he would say about "Pay it forward"?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Ecclesiastes 11:1

Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back. (For context, read 11:1-6.)

Proverbs 19:17

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full. (No context needed.)

Matthew 6:3-4

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (For context, read 6:1-4.)

All three of these biblical entries speak of or imply a reward for acts of charity and kindness, but not in the *quid pro quo* sense, for the reward is not necessarily tangible or even in kind to what was given.

Questions: What reward do you think Jesus was talking about that comes from giving alms "in secret"? What reward do you think the Choctaw tribe in 1847 received from making their contribution to the suffering Irish people? What reward do you suppose the Irish people today received from making their contributions to the Navajos and Hopis? How might this reward be passed on in the future?

Ruth 2:10-11

Then [Ruth] fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." (For context read 2:1-17.)

Ruth, a Moabite and widow, came to Israel along with her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, also a widow, to help Naomi. Having no way to earn a living, Ruth went to glean leftover crops in a field owned by Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. When Boaz found Ruth laboring in his field, he urged her to work only in his field and instructed his workers to see that she was not bothered and to share their drinking water with her. He also told his workers to leave extra crops in the field for Ruth to glean.

When Ruth realized how Boaz's arrangements helped her, she asked why she had found favor with him, especially since she was a foreigner. Boaz's reply, quoted above, plainly suggests that Ruth was receiving kindness now because of what she had unselfishly done for Naomi. Ruth had had no idea that her kindness to her mother-in-law would be rewarded or that she was paying forward into her own account -- she'd given her service freely to Naomi (see 1:16-17) -- but the Lord was now providing for both Ruth and Naomi through Boaz.

Questions: In what ways is Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi an example of the Golden Rule? Would it still be an example of that rule if she had not been helped by Boaz? Why or why not?

Galatians 6:10

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all ... (For context, read 6:7-10.)

Working for the good of all can sometimes be expressed through pay-it-forward actions.

Questions: In what ways have you tried to work for the good of all others? What commitments besides a pay-it-forward motivation help you do good for others with whom you have no obvious unity? What do you think is meant by the Irish proverb "In each other's shadows the people live"? What is the difference, if any, between working "for the good of all" and working "for the common good"?

2 Corinthians 8:10-12

And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something -- now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has -- not according to what one does not have. (For context, read 8:1-15.)

Although Christianity was born among Jews, the apostle Paul eventually found his work of proclaiming the gospel to be primary to Gentiles. So in time, the strong reception of Christ among the Gentiles caused the Jewish followers of Jesus in mother church in Jerusalem to wrestle with the whole issue of whether a person had to become a Jew first in order to follow Jesus. At a crucial meeting of the church leaders, described in Acts 15, the matter was settled, and Gentiles were welcomed as full members of Christ's body without having to go through Judaism.

In Paul's account of that same meeting, found in Galatians 2, he adds one other thing, that the leaders of the Jerusalem church asked only that Paul and those to whom he took the gospel message, "remember the poor," which Paul says he was "eager to do" in any case (Galatians 2:10). And elsewhere, Paul states that the intended recipients of this collection for the poor were those "among the saints at Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26) in the mother church.

As Paul spread the word about the needs in Jerusalem, the Gentile believers in several of the churches where he traveled participated in the collection. Those in Corinth apparently made a good start in putting aside money for the poor in Jerusalem as well, but after a year or so, they got sidetracked. In the verses above, Paul urges them to get back on track and "finish doing it." He then goes on to say, "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has -- not according to what one does not have." In other words, the spirit in which the gift is given is where the act of giving becomes a spiritual action.

If that was all we knew about this whole matter, we might think that there was some sort of a *quid pro quo* deal going on here: "We in the mother church agree that the Gentiles don't have to undergo the rites of Judaism and you, Paul, take an offering from them for the poor in our church." But that's not the case. At its root, the collection is an expression of kinship (what the Navajos call *K'e*) between the Jewish and Gentile believers, a sense of oneness between them. The Jewish Christians have preached and taught the faith, making it possible for the Gentiles to find salvation in Christ as well. In appreciation for what has been given to them and out of concern for their fellow believers, they make an offering in response.

It is not that there are no poor in the Corinthian church who could use some help from their fellow believers, but rather that there is a sense of responsibility to help those in Jerusalem as well. Far from

thinking that they had to *pay back* the Jerusalem church for the faith they had passed on to them, the Corinthians were *paying forward* their faith to people in need.

Respond to this: Here's what we Christians know for sure: Giving, at its heart, is more a spiritual matter than a budget matter. It is never a *quid pro quo*. It is neither a payment for blessings received nor a bribe for blessings hoped for. But it does have to do with gratitude for the faith handed down, for salvation given, for gospel joy, for confidence that God's way is best. It can't be paid back, and isn't expected to be, but it can and should be paid forward.

For Further Discussion

1. React to this: Ireland had remained neutral during World War II, but right after the war, the Irish Red Cross, with considerable government and public support, equipped and staffed a hospital in the devastated French town of St-Lo. That town had been almost completely destroyed in the Allied bombings at the time of the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944, losing almost 90 percent of its buildings. One of the most urgent needs was for proper medical care, the town's hospital having been one of the buildings lost.

It so happened that the man who was quartermaster for the hospital and acted as interpreter was one of the 20th century's great writers, Samuel Beckett. In a short essay, "The Capitol of the Ruins," published posthumously, he described what the hospital meant to a forgotten people who had nothing: "What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none ... but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them, and who knows, by them in us ... of that smile at the human conditions ... little to be extinguished by bombs ... -- the smiling deriding, among other things, the having and the non having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health."

2. Read [this article](#) about the Navajo concept of *K'e* and decide what parts of it, if any, correspond to concepts in Christianity.

3. Discuss this: In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes about the African proverb, "A person is a person through other persons."

He writes, "The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called *ubuntu* in Nguni languages. ... It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion. A person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they are less than who they are. The quality of *ubuntu* gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them."

4. Comment on this Cherokee proverb: "When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice."

5. At first glance, the Navajo would seem to be an unlikely population for a coronavirus to spread through. The population is about that of Springfield, Missouri, but spread out over an area the size of

Rhode Island, Delaware, Connecticut, New Jersey and New Hampshire combined, What's more, the culture discourages touching (including handshakes), and there is almost no mass transit used.

On the other hand, there are several factors making such a disease more likely to spread and be serious, including few trade hubs (i.e., trade is concentrated in a few areas), poor sanitation practices (no running water in many homes) and a limited number of health-care facilities, which being government-run, are not always as responsive as private-pay facilities (according to one observer who spoke with *The Wired Word*). One of the first loci of infection was a Christian church rally in early March. With a small population, it doesn't take many deaths for the situation to seem out of control. With all these factors -- and the probabilistic nature of the disease spread and its effects -- discuss how God's providence and your trust in him are affected.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to look for opportunities to pay forward from the blessings you have received.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for making us interconnected with others. Help us to recognize not only the uniqueness of the way of Jesus, but also the common ground we share with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Pandemic Shines Spotlight on the Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Social Support Systems

The Wired Word for the Week of May 31, 2020

In the News

Since his wife died a year ago, Daniel Jonce Evans has lived in what he calls a "shadow" of perpetual grief that is compounded by the unfamiliar territory of single parenthood of two bereaved young children and a heavy burden of medical debt incurred during his dead wife's terminal illness. (*The Wired Word* lesson titled "Provocative Christian Writer Rachel Held Evans, Dead at 37, Still Speaks to Many," the second lesson for May 12, 2019, can be accessed from the "Choose a Different Lesson" list at www.TheWiredWord.com.)

Daniel wrote recently about the struggle to find affordable health care. On one occasion, Rachel had been airlifted between two hospitals that were in their insurance network, but the \$69,999 helicopter trip was not covered. Eventually, insurance paid \$8,000, but Daniel still doesn't know whether he will be on the hook for the balance of \$61,999. Another bill for more than \$200,000 was reduced to about \$20,000 after an insurance company review.

Daniel's experience led him to appreciate individuals who helped him navigate reams of paperwork and phone calls, while at the same time he "felt betrayed by the system" in which he says health-care providers valiantly strive to save lives while "understaffed, overloaded hospitals are run as profit-making businesses instead of essential components of a social safety net. Health insurance companies,

by inserting themselves between providers and patients, have fractured the billing landscape and obscured costs."

"No one should risk bankruptcy for a trip to the E.R.," Daniel said.

A year ago, the Federal Reserve reported that four in ten Americans didn't have \$400 savings for emergency expenses, a percentage we have every reason to believe has skyrocketed due to the current high level of unemployment.

The global pandemic has raised concern about how basic human rights, such as the right to affordable health care, safe food, clean air and water, shelter, work and adequate compensation for one's labor, etc., can be protected.

Many migrant farm workers, who have been classified as essential workers, depend on food banks, which have struggled to keep up with the increased demand on their resources since the Covid-19 outbreak, said Ellen Burnette, Director of Cultivate Abundance in Fort Myers, Florida.

And yet, "the people that pick our food don't have enough food to eat themselves," she said.

Ligia Gualpa coordinates the Worker's Justice Project in Brooklyn, New York, which serves day laborers who work in construction, housecleaning, street vending, restaurants, delivery, warehouses, etc. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, Gualpa says at least six of ten workers have lost their jobs. Because their work is often unsteady by its nature, they typically don't qualify for health or unemployment insurance or for paid sick leave.

[Jonathan Vargas Andres](#), an undocumented recipient of DACA (Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals), his wife and brother, are nurses treating Covid patients in a North Carolina hospital intensive care unit. In June, the Supreme Court is scheduled to rule on a series of cases challenging this administration's attempt to end the DACA program, which could result in Jonathan's deportation, even though he is considered an essential worker and has risked his life to care for sick and dying people in America.

"You don't even know if anything that you're doing to help your country is going to be appreciated," Jonathan said. "And in a couple months, you might be deported."

He is only one of thousands of immigrant laborers who could be told they no longer have the right to work or reside in the United States. Almost 42,000 DACA recipients serve in the health-care industry as doctors, nurses, paramedics, and in other capacities.

"Day laborers and house cleaners are again in the front lines of the cleanup and recovery [from the pandemic]," Gualpa says. Yet they frequently lack protection of what many consider their basic human rights.

Daniel Jonce Evans voiced hope that we would "use this moment to fix the broken systems that make heartbreaking situations even more unbearable."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[After My Wife Died I Was Consumed by Both Grief and Paperwork. We Must Work Together to Change the Medical System. *TIME*](#)

[Covid-19 Pandemic Puts Chronically Poor at Even More Risk. *Baptist News*](#)

[The Jornaleros: Voices of Day Laborers Facing Covid-19. *Nonprofit Quarterly*](#)

['Free in Christ' to Defy State Closures? Latino Churches Offer Insight. *Christianity Today*](#)

Applying the News Story

As authorities consider how and when to reopen our society during a time of pandemic, the question of personal rights, responsibilities, freedom and privileges appears in different forms across the spectrum of our communal life. In this lesson, we can only scratch the surface of issues related to the right to health care, safe food and clean water, housing, work, fair compensation for our labor, freedom of worship and assembly, for starters.

Lack of adequate health care and other essential services for members of society who are most vulnerable is nothing new. In Mark 5:25-26 we read of a woman Jesus healed "who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, who ... had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse." Her poor health likely made it harder to support herself, and her declining financial resources probably contributed to worsening her physical condition in a downward spiral.

In John 5:1-9, many blind, lame, and paralyzed invalids lay by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, waiting for someone to help them into a nearby pool, whose waters purportedly had healing properties for those who stepped in first when the waters were stirred up. There Jesus met a man who had been sick for 38 years.

The health-care "system," such as it was, had certainly failed this man. Jesus knew the man had been there for a long time. He asked him if he wanted to be made well, and the man replied in the only terms he understood: that he thought his healing depended on beating some other sick person into the healing waters. But the sick man lacked the strength to make it into the water on his own, and "had no one" to help him access the resources he needed.

Jesus responded by sidestepping the system that wasn't working for the sick man, and by healing him immediately with a word, without the man ever coming close to the edge of the pool.

How often we develop "tunnel vision" rather than thinking creatively when we have a problem! Jesus shows a better way.

As we think about what systems are failing people today, and how human needs might be addressed more effectively, scripture invites us to "think outside the pool" and consider new ways of thinking and acting toward the most vulnerable people in our world.

The Big Questions

1. What rights, if any, do humans have that are fundamental to humanity? If there are such rights, from whence do they come? And how do you know humans have such rights?

2. Which rights, if any, are absolute, and which are dependent on other factors, or which must be balanced with other rights?
3. What is the difference between rights and privileges?
4. What is the relationship between rights and responsibilities?
5. What aspects of responsibility belong to individuals, and which belong to a group, family, community, nation, or the human race in general? Where does the church fit into the picture?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 22:22-23, 27

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them. ...
If you have nothing with which to pay,
why should your bed be taken from under you? (No context needed.)*

This chapter contains wisdom about handling wealth and poverty. First of all, the author says that the rich and the poor are alike in this: that the Lord made them all (v. 2).

In verse 27 we hear the anguished cry of the poor, asking why the poor who have nothing should lose even the little that they need to sustain life. As the rich get obscenely richer and the poor get desperately poorer in our own time, we hear this cry rising up, demanding justice: Why should the rich and powerful, who have so much, prey upon the poor and weak, who have so little?

We are reminded of Nathan's rebuke of King David, after he took the wife of Uriah, one of his officers, for himself, and then conspired to murder Uriah. Nathan told David a story about a poor man who had one lamb who was like a daughter to him. A rich man who lived in the same city stole the poor man's lamb to feed a traveler who came for a visit, because he was loathe to "impoverish" himself by taking a lamb from one of his many flocks for that purpose (2 Samuel 11:1-14, 26-27; 12:1-9).

David knew the man in Nathan's story had done a despicable thing. And when Nathan said, "You are the man!" he saw himself for what he really was: a sinner who had committed a grievous deed. He had acted as though he was entitled to take what he coveted, and as though he was above the law, and would face no consequences. But within a week after the birth of his son by Uriah's widow Bathsheba, the infant was dead, and throughout David's life, other tragic consequences would follow (2 Samuel 12:10-12, 15-19).

David's story illustrates the principles found in Proverbs 22:9 and 16, where those who are generous in sharing their bread with the poor are contrasted with those who oppress the poor in order to enrich themselves and other wealthy people; the former are blessed while the latter will know only loss.

There is good reason why those who oppress the poor will not prosper: The Lord himself advocates for them (vv. 22-23)!

Questions: Have you ever felt entitled or obligated to take what you wanted in life, simply because you could? Where do you think that idea or attitude came from? How does that viewpoint square with biblical values?

Leviticus 25:35-38

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. (For context, read 25:35-43.)

Moses instructed the people to care for those among them who became financially stressed, homeless or hungry. They were to support them so they could get back on their feet again. Sometimes that meant opening up their homes to provide housing and a sense of belonging to a family that loved them. Those who had the means to lend financial support or food to those in need were not to do it to make a profit from the poor.

They were to be generous to those in need because God had been generous to them when they were in desperate need as slaves in Egypt. Recalling that past experience was meant to elicit feelings of empathy, generosity and kindness that could inform the way they treated those who were struggling now.

They could either model their behavior on the example of those who had oppressed them in the past or they could remember how God treated them and strive to treat others the same way.

Questions: Recall a time when you were in need and someone helped you without requiring any compensation or favor in return. How did that person's act impact you?

Whose responsibility is it to care for the destitute, the hungry and the homeless? Does our faith require us to help people who are having financial trouble, or whose basic needs are unmet? Why or why not?

Luke 14:12-14

[Jesus] said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (For context, read 14:1-14.)

One Sabbath, Jesus went to the house of a leader of the Pharisees for dinner. He advised his host that the next time he gave a luncheon or dinner party, he should invite people who could not reciprocate. By showing hospitality and generosity to them, Jesus said, he would be blessed in this life and repaid in the next, at the resurrection of the righteous.

What Jesus is suggesting is that we learn to delay or defer gratification of our natural desire to gain an immediate reward, and take it on faith that showing kindness to the poor and needy will bring a reward later on.

Questions: Have you ever seen a person take this advice to heart and do what Jesus commanded? What happened?

Imagine yourself at a banquet. Are you the host, one of the relatives, friends or affluent neighbors, or one of the poor, disabled or blind? Why do you occupy that role in the story?

If you were a relative, friend or affluent neighbor of a person who hosted a banquet for the poor, how would you react? If you were a poor, disabled or blind person invited to such a banquet, how would you feel?

If you were the host of such a banquet, what blessing do you think you would receive in this life from showing hospitality and generosity to the poor?

Acts 4:32-35

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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (For context, read 4:32-37.)

The early Church was characterized by a sense of generosity and oneness of spirit, so those who had means shared with those who did not have resources. Although those who owned property had the right to do as they pleased with their possessions (Acts 5:1-4), they sold lands or houses when people in the community needed help, in effect, crowd-funding those who had a need.

The apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the testimony of their powerful words, but the whole group bore witness to the power of the Resurrection in the way they cared for one another (v. 33).

Questions: Have you ever lived in or seen a community that operated the way the early church did? If so, how did the community deal with issues of personal rights, possessions and meeting needs?

What would have to happen in order to create such a community in today's world?

For Further Discussion

1. In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, "In Africa when you ask someone 'How are you?' the reply you get is in the plural even when you are speaking to one person. A man would say, 'We are well' or 'We are not well.' He himself may be quite well, but his grandmother is not well and so he is not well either."

How does this way of thinking relate to biblical concepts describing the people of God?

2. Respond to this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "I remember a friend, a heavy smoker, back during my theater days, who told me, 'We don't have a health-care crisis in this country. We have a health-care-payment crisis.' He noted that at that point he could get no help from insurance for a smoking-cessation program, but he had great coverage in the event he had a lung removed. That's changed somewhat since those days, but people are still left with staggering bills."

3. Discuss this, from author Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, who teaches New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, who explains what Paul meant by his statement in Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

"Paul talks about 'freedom in Christ' but for what end? To protest all forms of hindrances, laws that govern our ability to move, shake hands, or gather in our churches?" Estrada doesn't think so.

"You, my brothers ... and sisters, were called to be free," Paul writes. "But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:13-14).

"What if we take Paul's language on freedom seriously?" Estrada asks. "What would happen if instead of fighting to gather in a building we would actively fight for the freedom to serve our neighbor? ...

"The activities of my freedom should be determined and shaped by the needs of my neighbor," Estrada continues. "Their needs are simple: food, health, and medical resources for the most vulnerable communities. ...

"We must remember that our freedom to worship has not been restrained; only the ability to gather in buildings. ... The way we gather is also a public statement on how we view and value one another. The freedom of Christ that is fundamental to our faith is not supposed to be lived for oneself. It is a freedom that prompts us to reimagine how we can love and serve one another, especially during this pandemic."

Do governmental edicts limiting large gatherings of people in order to protect people from a contagious virus violate their constitutional rights to freedom of religion and assembly? Are those "rights" guaranteed by the Bible? How do you balance what you believe are your religious responsibilities (such as your responsibility to worship God) with your social (and some would argue, also religious) obligation to love your neighbor as yourself by maintaining safe public health practices?

4. Consider this: Peter W. Marty, editor of *The Christian Century*, [wrote](#) about how eager many people are to resume assembling together to worship as a congregation. Yet, a significant majority of believers understand the need to exercise care and caution as churches reopen, to protect the health of the most vulnerable among us. But some "churches have filed lawsuits claiming that a ban on religious gatherings is a violation of the free exercise clause in the First Amendment," Marty reported.

Why have some chosen to go this route? he pondered. "I don't think it has anything to do with an honest conviction that various governors can't stand religion. It has everything to do with an obsession over rights," he speculated.

Marty acknowledged that the rights mentioned in the U.S. Constitution are valuable, but added "I want a faith that's larger than the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution is a fantastically valuable document to any of us who are American citizens. But the Constitution doesn't require me to give food to the hungry or shelter for the homeless ... to listen to science, or consider the needs of the medically vulnerable, or attend to the aspirations of the elderly."

"There's a reason the Bible shows little interest in individual rights," Marty concluded. "If I see my life primarily as a prepackaged set of guaranteed rights owed me, instead of as a gift of God, what motivation is there to feel deep obligation toward society's most vulnerable? ... What's the point of looking outward toward others if I'm chiefly responsible for looking inward and securing the personal rights that are mine?"

5. The founding documents of our nation speak to the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. [The Declaration of Independence](#) states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution states: "We the People of the United States, in Order to

form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution (aka [The Bill of Rights](#)) include the rights of free exercise of religion, free speech, free press, assembly, etc., among others.

The Supreme Court of the United States has indicated that these rights are weighed against each other and against concerns for public safety and "the general Welfare." So these rights are not "absolute" since at times they may conflict with each other. One can say that the right to "freedom of speech" means I could yell "FIRE!" in a crowded theater, but since doing so could endanger the public, my right to speak freely in that context must be abridged. That means that the constitution has to be read as a whole, and applied appropriately depending on the circumstances.

The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), ratified by the United Nations, uses similar language to affirm that "all members of the human family" have "inherent dignity" and "worth" and "equal and inalienable rights" that include "freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want." As time allows, scan the document's 30 articles before considering the following questions:

How do you interpret the rights outlined in these documents? For which might you find biblical support? Are there any for which you would be hard pressed to find biblical support? Which, if any, might not really be rights at all?

What makes something a right, as opposed to a privilege, or something else? Give an example of how someone might use the claim of a right to harm or oppress someone else.

Are certain rights of greater importance than others, and if so, which would you place higher on the scale? How would you determine which rights have higher priority in any given circumstance?

Responding to the News

Brainstorm ways the church can work with others to transform societal systems and structures that are not meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. You might focus on one system (such as employment, education, justice, eldercare, health care, the economy, national security, etc.), or cast your vision more broadly. What is one thing your church can do now to meet unmet needs in your community?

Prayer

Lord, our people are hurting, and we don't know how to help. So many of the building blocks of our society seem to be crumbling before our eyes, and we need your wisdom and grace to learn a new way of relating to one another, based on the way you relate to us, with grace, kindness and generosity. Teach us the loveliness of using our freedom to serve others rather than ourselves. In the name of the One who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Amen.