

Homily by Jim Huchthausen September 22, 2019

God wants His people to make a difference in the world. We live in an imperfect world with a large imbalance of wealth and power. Statistics show that the disparity between America's upper and lower classes has increased.

According to the Department of Labor, 12 percent of our country's population lives below the poverty level of \$25,750 a year for a family of four - or slightly more than \$2,000 a month - while the annual income of the upper-income class is nearly \$200,000. Today's average income of CEOs of the top 350 firms is \$17.2 million a year. That's a 1,000 percent increase since 1978. The salary ratio between today's top CEOs and the typical worker is 278-to-1.

According to today's Gospel (in St. Matthew), Jesus acknowledged those who care about those who are in need. Two verses (Chapter 25: 35-36) read: "For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Then six verses later, Jesus commented on those who neglect the needy. (Versus 42 and 43) "For I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Jesus is saying ... if one does not care about those in need, then one cannot care about Him; that is, no one can care about Jesus.

Jesus wants "the haves" in our society to help and support those who have little - those who are in need. He wants us to be compassionate to those who are helpless. And he wants us to reach out to those who are desperate.

Beginning with our country's inception in the 1780s and through the mid-1800s, America's economic livelihood rested on the backs of farmers and local merchants. Then the Industrial Revolution spread from England to the United States. This marked a major turning point in our country's socio-economic fabric.

During the Industrial Revolution, a process for creating steel was invented. For the first time, petroleum spurted up in the fields of Pennsylvania. Railroads connected the Midwest to the Atlantic Seaboard, so farmers in states such as Kansas and Nebraska could transport their agricultural products to the East. The invention of the mechanic reaper allowed farmers to cut grain at a faster rate, enabling them to double their crop size.

The Industrial Revolution required factories - and factories required assembly lines - and assembly lines demanded workers. The vast majority of these workers were immigrants who had come - for the most part - from northern and western Europe in the quest for a better life.

This era - in the late 1800s - became known as the Gilded Age. Powerful industrialists and financiers - known as the Robber Barons - made fortunes by forcing the small owners out of business and establishing monopolies. They engaged in unethical business practices and exploited their workers. The goal of this elite class may be characterized by two words: power and greed.

The average worker spent 12-14 hours a day in a factory - worked six days a week - totaling 72 hours a week. They enjoyed no benefits. If they were sick, they were not paid. Workers were fired if they joined one of the emerging labor unions (such as the Knights of Labor and AF of L). Many children and mothers were forced to work, so their family could survive from day to day. It was an era of "survival of the fittest."

A wide gulf separated the Robber Barons from the lower socio-economic classes. They were oppressed, repressed, and likely depressed. They were at the mercy of the Robber Barons.

For example, John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company established a monopoly by forcing the small oil man out of business by lowering the price of oil. He went to church nearly every Sunday morning and then ventured to his office to strategize how he could increase his income. (Rockefeller was NOT an Episcopalian.)

Cornelius Vanderbilt owned steamship lines and railroads. He dictated to Midwest farmers the price to transport their goods to the East coast. Farmers either paid a high price to ship their crops or they rotted in the fields.

Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan were carbon copies of these two entrepreneurs. Carnegie was one of very few multi-millionaires who became a philanthropist in his latter years.

Then America underwent a tremendous change in the early 1900s. After President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Vice President Teddy Roosevelt moved into the Oval Office. Teddy Roosevelt was influenced by a small group of people who had a profound impact on America. All were accomplished writers. Their books and magazines were stunning. Their audience was enlightened. Their writings spread rapidly across the country ... all the way to the White House.

They became known as the muckrakers. They exposed the horrific conditions of the day. They scraped away the muck - the filth – they cleared the surface – and exposed the evils and inequities of the day.

Upton Sinclair (who authored *The Jungle*) wrote of the horrendous conditions in the Chicago meat-packing yards. A portion of *The Jungle* reads:

“It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. The meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one.”

Teddy Roosevelt was heavily influenced by Upton Sinclair. Three years later the Meat Inspection Act (1906) became law, and years later the Food and Drug Administration was created.

Jacob Riis (author of *How the Other Half Lives*) and Lincoln Steffens (*The Shame of the Cities*) exposed the horrific living conditions of families in New York City.

The quintessential workers lived in tenement buildings. Landlords - or slum lords - rarely repaired their apartments. Health conditions were dreadful. Tuberculosis ran rampant. Rodents rummaged through their cabinets in the kitchen. Their heating systems were often in disrepair. During the frigid winters, families often went to bed wrapped in several layers of blankets - only to wake up in the morning with a rat or two snuggled up next to them.

And the affluent owners? They lived comfortably in their estates where they spent much of their time counting their fortunes.

This is no hyperbole. This is no joke. This is the reality of the times.

Two verses in Proverbs, which we just recited, read: “Don’t take advantage of the poor just because you can. Don’t take advantage of those who stand helpless. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.”

If Jesus were to have walked in America around 1900, what would He do?
What would He say? With whom would He walk? WWJD What would Jesus do?

One of our responsibilities should be to make this a better world for everyone. We should forge ahead. It takes an abundance of people to make a difference ... and it can

be accomplished. We are the wealthiest country on Earth and have the capability of caring for each and every American.

In the book of Saint James (2: 14-16), we are told that the authenticity of our faith is demonstrated by our deeds. St. James wrote: “Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don’t have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, ‘God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!’ - if you do not give them the necessities of life?”

Chapter 1, verse 7 of the book of Isaiah says, “Learn to do right. Help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows.”

Sure, we do not live under those vile and horrendous conditions of the late 1800s. Today, we are presented with other challenges. Some claim that our country is polarized along lines of class and race. Many believe that the political climate in America is unstable - and that we live in perilous and uneasy times.

In the global arena, tensions have flared in the Middle East - the birth-place of two major religions. China is emerging as a great political, economic, and military power. And to what extent does Russia - one of the world’s super-powers - offer a threat to American interests?

There are many of us Americans who care - and God wants us all to care. We are God’s stewards, entrusted by Him with opportunities and abilities. We are responsible to Him.

A prime example of a contemporary philanthropist is Bill Gates. His net worth is estimated at \$90 billion. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is the largest philanthropist group in the world with \$50.7 billion in assets.

The Gates personally gave \$36 billion to their foundation since its inception in the year 2000. The Gates Foundation earmarks its funds for poor people to live healthy and productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty.

My opening words a few minutes ago were, “God wants His people to make a difference in the world.”

We can be hopeful. We can be optimistic. We can make a difference. We can make this a better world by ...

choosing empathy over apathy
choosing compassion over antipathy

choosing hope over despair
choosing human rights over injustice
choosing to support democratic institutions rather than totalitarian regimes
choosing belief over doubt
choosing morality over amorality and immorality
choosing inclusiveness over racial discrimination
choosing truth over lies
choosing love or hate

If Jesus were to walk alongside you and me today, what would He think?
What would He say? What would Jesus do?