

Are you feeling a pinch?

Do you feel like your income is staying the same, but things are getting more expensive?

Do you sense that your electricity, groceries, car insurance, college payments, medical bills, are all incrementally going up while your income, either as a worker or a retiree, is staying the same?

Do you feel like you have less economic security, less wiggle room, less discretionary income, than you did in the past?

Well, if you feel that way, you aren't alone.

Think about a python squeezing its prey, little by little, and every time it exhales, the snake squeezes a little tighter, so slowly that it doesn't notice, until it's too late.

That's all of us.

Now, I wasn't around when the American economy was booming and wages were good and a high school graduate could get a good manufacturing job and buy a house and a car and support a family on one income.

(Side note, I know this prosperity didn't apply to all people, only certain white men, but I hear that times were good for some folks after WWII).

"While the other war combatants were trying to recover from the destruction of the war,

America became the supermarket, hardware store and auto dealership to the world.

Markets for American products abounded and opportunity was everywhere for American workers of all economic means to get ahead.

America had a virtual monopoly on rebuilding the world.

Combined with the G.I. Bill of 1944, which provided money for returning veterans to go to college, and government loans to buy houses and start businesses, the middle class in America boomed, as did American power, wealth and prestige.

Between 1946 and 1973, productivity in America grew by 104 percent. Unions led the way in assuring wages for workers grew by an equal amount.” (“35 Mind-Blowing Facts About Inequality.” www.Alternet.org).

Now, not so much.

Today, the top 1% of the American population owns 50% of the investment assets, including stocks, bonds and mutual funds.

The poorest half of our country owns just half of one percent of the investments.

As for taxes, *“Tax rates for the middle class have remained essentially unchanged since 1960.*

Tax rates on the highest earning Americans have plunged from an almost 70% tax rate in 1945 down to around 35% today.

Corporate tax rates have dropped from 30 percent in the 1950s to under 10 percent today....

CEOs in 1965 earned about 24 times the amount of the average worker.

In 1980 they earned 42 times as much.

Today, CEOs earn 325 times the average worker.” (www.alternet.org)

If you want my sources, I'd be happy to give them to you after the service.

While our economy is getting stronger, the money being generated is not going to wages, as wages as a percentage of the economy have dropped to historic lows.

If you want to know why people like me, millennials, aren't buying houses and cars, it's because we're getting poorer.

The median wealth of people under 35 has dropped 64% since 1984.

Over 20%, or 1 in 5, children in America lives below the poverty line.

This rate is higher than almost all other developed countries.

This is all despite the fact that the economy has GROWN 83% in the past 25 years alone and that corporate profits have doubled.

If you are not a numbers person, all that was to say that fewer and fewer people have more and more of the money, and if you're feeling pinched, that's why.

More of us are sharing a smaller slice of the pie.

We cannot continue down this path, it's unsustainable.

One of two things has to happen, we have to right our course, re-focus on workers and wages and rebalance our economy so that wages are more equitably distributed,

OR, the proletariat is going to rise up in due time.

Here's the thing, you can't regulate morality.

If we truly believe that we belong to each other, our economy cannot be built on profits alone.

It can't be all about the bottom line, it can't be all about making money for the investors.

If that's the case, then we are always putting money over people.

And thus, this income inequality will continue to worsen, until, revolution.

All of us, especially those in power, the executives and the stockholders, need to have a 'come to Jesus' moment.

They need to reorient themselves back towards God, to the one who created all of us, who is the source of all that we have, who reminds us that we are responsible for each other and that it's never okay to exploit people in favor of profits. Never.

Today's parable about the vineyard owner, the tenants and the slaves, is an indictment against unjust economic practices.

Jesus was speaking to leaders who were not caring for their own.

Jesus was talking to the chief priests and the Pharisees who had turned a blind eye to the poor and were solely concerned with how much money and how many goods they could acquire for themselves.

Here's a little background of the story we heard this morning,

“Culturally, the leasing of land to tenant farmers was a common experience in the first century.

Landowners could expect tenants to turn over (a portion of) the crop (cf. 21:34).

Those who failed to meet the landowner's standards would be removed from the land and landowning elite could usually pay others to remove them forcefully if necessary.” (Brehm, Alan. “Vengeance?”, www.thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com. Nov. 2, 2011.)

As such, the tenants have no bargaining power and are often subject to exploitation, which is why they do such horrific things in this story.

Here's a summary of the story Jesus told us, it's *“about an absentee landlord who follows the standard customs regarding tenant farmers—customs which are incredibly unfair.*

Essentially, he takes such a large cut of the profit as to leave the farmers who are actually working the land with barely enough to keep their families alive.

As a result, the tenants rise up and determine to overthrow their tyrant of a landlord. And in response, he sends in an army and wipes them out.” (Brehm)

The bad news is that this is still the way the world works.

If you feel that someone has done you wrong, you have the ability to get even, which usually includes lawsuits and maybe even criminal action.

This would be a just system, but it's almost always those with the power, wealth, resources, going after those without it, the workers who have none of the above, unless they mobilize, which is what they did in this story.

They mobilized in a sick way, killing the owner's slaves and eventually the owner's son, but the point Jesus is trying to make is that they were angry, tired of being exploited.

This story has been interpreted in many different ways, but I think Jesus likens the religious and political elites, whom he's talking to, to the owner of the vineyard.

He took advantage of his employees; they elites took advantage of the common folk, the middle class.

The good news is that we, individually and collectively, can turn back towards God, or those in power can be replaced by those who put people above profits.

As Jesus put it, *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."*
(Matthew 21: 43)

Imagine, for a second, if everyone on Wall Street and in Washington D.C., everyone who claims to be a Christian, actually acted like it.

While I generally support the separation of church and state, if those in power actually acted according to the teachings of our faith, if this was truly a Christian nation, I don't think it would be such a terrible one to live in, including for those who aren't Christian.

While the vineyard owner was obsessed with production and yield, God was more concerned with the land and those who were tending to it.

“While we are preoccupied with net product, God is preoccupied with protection.

While we seek to secure the harvest of our efforts, God insists that our harvest is not ours alone.

That is, it's not our business to secure maximum yield.” (Lewis, Karoline. “Tending the Vineyard,” www.workingpreacher.org. Sept. 28, 2014.)

But it is our business to tend to the workers of the field,
to make sure they get their due, that they're treated fairly,
so that they can flourish and have prosperous lives,
rather than feeling like they're being squeezed by a python.

Amen.

Imagine if all those in power who said they were Christians actually acted like it. “Both Isaiah and Jesus ask, how should the vineyard owner handle this? What would you do about the perpetrators of violence and injustice?... The heart of what Jesus wants to get at is this: God’s spirit moves to the people who want to bear fruit. God will find people who want to hear “I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and you will bear much fruit.”... “While we are preoccupied with net product, God is preoccupied with protection. While we seek to secure the harvest of our efforts, God insists that our harvest is not ours alone. That is, it’s not our business to secure maximum yield. But it certainly is our business to tend the possibility of yield. And tending is no easy task.”

Page 1: Disparity of wealth in our nation, shrinking of the middle class. Something peaceful has to be done, otherwise there’s a revolution/uprising when the proletariat gets large enough.

Page 2: If we truly believe that we belong to each other, our economy can’t be built on profits alone, otherwise you’re putting money over people. More globally, the world’s resources don’t belong to us either, we can’t say that all are God’s children and that we are the caretakers of God’s land and then act entitled to the resources that belong to other nations. Exploiting them for all they have to offer then leaving their economy in ruins.

Page 3: Jesus’ parable this morning is an indictment against leaders who cannot care for their own. Landlord= business owner Tenants= stockholders Slaves= workers. “Culturally, the leasing of land to tenant farmers was a common experience in the first century. Landowners could expect tenants to turn over (a portion of) the crop (cf. 21:34). Those who failed to meet the landowner’s standards would be removed from the land and landowning elite could usually pay others to remove them forcefully if necessary.” “Jesus tells a story about an absentee landlord who follows the standard customs regarding tenant farmers—customs which are incredibly unfair.^[3] Essentially, he takes such a large cut of the profit as to leave the farmers who are actually working the land with barely enough to keep their families alive. As a result, the tenants rise up and determine to overthrow their tyrant of a landlord. And in response, he sends in an army and wipes them out. That’s the way the world works.^[4] When someone does you wrong, if you have the ability to get even, you do it.”

Page 4: The good news is that we, individually and collectively, can turn back towards God. Imagine if all those in power who said they were Christians actually acted like it. “Both Isaiah and Jesus ask, how should the vineyard owner handle this? What would you do about the perpetrators of violence and injustice?... The heart of what Jesus wants to get at is this: God’s spirit moves to the people who want to bear fruit. God will find people who want to hear “I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and you will bear much fruit.”... “While we are preoccupied with net product, God is preoccupied with protection. While we seek to secure the harvest of our efforts, God insists that our harvest is not ours alone. That is, it’s not our business to secure maximum yield. But it certainly is our business to tend the possibility of yield. And tending is no easy task.”