

**SERMON**  
**By: Gail Fricker**

**It's Not Charity (Social Gospel Part 1)**

**March 5, 2017**

**Isaiah 58:6-10. Matthew 25: 34-40**

J.S. Woodworth was a Canadian humanitarian and Methodist preacher in the early 1900's. He spent two decades ministering to the poor and the working classes in Canada. He made it his mission to take time to be with the poor. He went door to door into neighbourhoods, collecting stories in a kind of sociological inquiry, documenting his findings by taking photographs, and seeing first hand what poverty really looked like. He was appalled at the disease and the degradation that he observed. In one of his many books, he wrote:

*Bad housing conditions exist where several families are found living in a dwelling intended for a single family, unsanitary privies, lack of drainage, inadequate water supplies, filthy out-houses, defective plumbing, dark rooms and halls, overcrowding .. all of these evils are sooner or later found in all cities. And in nearly every case, it is due to neglect on the part of the community, ignorance on the part of citizens, and a feeling of 'things can't be too bad as long as they are hidden ...it's a dangerous sort of apathy, content to leave things as they are, a laissez faire policy which brings forth fruit of unrighteousness.'*

These words were written in 1911 – over 100 years ago, and yet, they could be still be true today. It has become shockingly ordinary that people today need to line up at foodbanks, beg, steel, sleep in doorways or on church pews, and sell their bodies to support themselves and their children. But, so often we turn a blind eye to this necessity, or we pretend it doesn't exist in our present 21<sup>st</sup> century. How many of us even asked ourselves – who is that sleeping on our church pew here in Knox? And how many of us pretended that's she just wasn't there? And how many decided that it was somebody else's problem?

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time of mass industrialization and urbanization, the Social Gospel movement was spreading across US and Canada. Speakers like, Gladden, Rauschenbush, and Woodsworth, were distraught by the terrible rise in social problems, especially in issues of social injustice such as economic inequality, poverty, crime, racial tension, child labor, underfunded schools and much more. It's a list that could be relevant still today. But they were not willing to turn a blind eye to the problems. They did not agree with the widely-held view that "the poor were poor because they were lazy." They believed that social problems were the responsibility of everyone – and theologically, they believed that it was a Christian's responsibility to work towards ending such social evils of injustice.

The social gossellers looked to the ministry of Charles Wesley in the UK. His work with the poor included feeding, clothing, and housing the poor; he set up training programs to prepare the unemployed for work; he spent time visiting the poor, sick and prisoners; Wesley created new forms of health care education; and he raised questions about how an economy could produce such poverty. Wesley insisted that the life with the poor was at the heart of

Christian discipleship. He believed that “the poor in Jesus Christ’ has to do with the nature of the church and with salvation.” And the social gospellers likewise emphasized that salvation was not a personal issue about saving individual souls, but instead salvation came through the discipleship of building the Kingdom of God on earth. Their view of salvation was a collective rather than a private affair – the ‘much needed’ social improvements and social programs were an outward expression of the Kingdom of God. And they believed that Christ’s second coming could not happen until humankind had rid itself of social evils of injustice.

Even today, these views sound like radical ideas. And 100 years ago, they were even less accepted, even when they were spoken from the pulpit. Woodsworth was told by his parishioners to preach “less ill digested sociology and more simple gospel preaching”. Perhaps I will be told the same! The social gospellers challenged the social norms of society. They challenged the rise of capitalism. They challenged the status quo of the ‘have’ and the ‘have nots’. In essence, they made their listeners think! And the rhetoric of the social gospellers, coupled with the increase in photographic journalistic images, made it impossible to ignore this progressive, social, and theological movement. People began to understand the new set of responsibilities that befell them as followers of Jesus Christ.

And that is where we fit in – 100 years later. As followers of Jesus Christ, we too must follow the example set for us by Jesus. He was a man that knew what it meant to be poor; to rely on friends for food and lodging; he understood homelessness; and he identified with the outcast and marginalized sectors of his society. Our image on the power point today shows Homeless Jesus, also known as Jesus the Homeless; it is a bronze sculpture in Toronto by Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz that depicts Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench.

Jesus knew poverty, but more importantly, Jesus understood the Kingdom of God. In everything that Jesus said and did, he exemplified bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. He was an embodiment of the social gospel. He treated others with justice, dignity, and love. He showed us how to “treat others as we want to be treated.” He taught us how to “love our neighbor”, and he challenged us to think about who our neighbor was? In Jesus day, he asked his listeners if their neighbor included the tax collector or the Pharisee? In our time, we must ask ourselves if our neighbor includes the bag lady who spends all day at the coffee shop, the man who lines up for food at the foodbank, or the young woman who stands waiting for customers on street corners?

In our scripture readings in Isaiah and Matthew today, we hear Jesus telling us to continue his work that he started when he was here on earth. He tells us to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the sick and lonely. It is our social responsibility as Christians to do these things. It is part of discipleship. And when we do, we not only increase in our personal relationship with Christ, but we also step in the direction of bringing the Kingdom of God on earth. As Woodworth said, we “must undertake a response to social issues if we want ‘God’s Will be done’ on earth.” In other words, when we take action, we are continuing the work of the social gospel.

But, my friends be warned. It is not enough to just provide band aid charity. As we enter into the season of Lent, and we think about doing 40 Acts of kindness – we must take that one step further. We must challenge the very system that allows such needs to exist. J.S. Woodsworth wrote in the height of the social gospel movement, “we have tried to provide for the poor, yet have we tried to alleviate the social conditions that led to the poverty?” Wesley’s efforts among the poor also moved beyond simple acts of charity to include empowerment strategies such as schools for poor children, employment programs, loan funds and even parish-based wellness efforts stemming from his innovative pharmacy work.

The charity of soup kitchen and food banks are incredibly needed – statistics tell us that 13% of all Canadians live in a state of food insecurity, not knowing where their next meal will come from – and 850,000 people use the food bank each month. But wouldn’t it be amazing if we could address the economic inequalities that cause the need for food banks? Nellie McClung, a political activist and social gospeller (who you might actually meet next week) spoke about the well-known story of The Good Samaritan. She gave it a new twist, saying that after taking the injured man to the inn, the Samaritan then went back to clean up the road – now I take that to mean that the Samaritan went back to address the causes of why the thieves felt that they needed to rob in the first place. J H Falk, who was writing at the same time, said that “without the examination and remedying of social and economic causes, little advance will be made in the campaign against misery, want, disease and death.”

The social gospel was, and still is a huge challenge to us as Christians. It most certainly gives us food for thought as we enter into Lent. But I want to leave you with a wonderful success story of a program that is close to home. It operates out of the Presbyterian church in Paris, and it called The Raw Carrot – their motto is ‘Changing Lives One Bowl of Soup at A Time.’ They work with people on the margins of Paris – some are functionally illiterate, others have learning challenges, some grew up in families of abuse or neglect, and some have physical limitations or are living with mental illness. All of these individuals have something in common: *the desire to live a purposeful life*. The vision of The Raw Carrot is to hire individuals in Paris that are currently on social assistance or that have barriers to traditional employment; they train them to cook up healthy, homemade, fresh and frozen soups and stews, and then they sell them to schools, seniors and others in the Paris community. The proceeds from the sales fund the salaries of the individuals participating. This initiative builds self confidence, provides job training and job creation. It is an example of the social gospel, alive and well today. It’s not just charity.