

## No Easy Answers

Rev. Dewey Johnson, Pastor Emeritus

*"The poor will always be with you."* Mt. 26: 11

It was back in the 1800s that the people of Canton, Mississippi, wondered how they could possibly build a new jail. The money wasn't there. But the Board of Councilmen had an easy answer. The new jail would be built out of the materials from the dismantled, torn-down old jail. And the old jail would be used until the new jail was finished. An easy answer to a hard question.

The advertising industry has succeeded admirably in making us a society of consumers. We'll buy all the easy answers provided. But type in "*articles about easy answers*" online and you'll find one topic or concern after another in which the article begins, "No easy answers for..."

A young rich man asked Jesus what he must do to have eternal life, given he's keeping the commandments. Jesus says, "*Sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.*" An easy answer for what to Jesus was an easy question.

But "**How can we end poverty?**" is a hard question with no easy answer.

The word for *poor* in New Testament Greek is *ptokos*, and it means one who does not have the power to thrive as others do.

- The poor man or woman may not have the resources (say, land) or opportunity to make a living, or a family to help out. (Lots of poor widows and orphans in the Bible.)
- The poor may not have the physical strength to make a living. (The paralytic trying to get in the pool in the hopes of being healed).
- The poor may not have the intelligence or the emotional balance needed. (The Gerasene demoniac would have had a hard time showing up for work at 8:00am after "*howling and bruising himself with stones*" all night long among the tombs.)

And because the root causes of poverty will always be with us – inadequate resources, little or no opportunity, no family guidance or support, poor health, psychological problems, no access to education or training, etc. – Jesus says. "*The poor will always be with you.*"

And Jesus does say "*with you.*" He does not say, "*The poor will always live on the other side of the tracks,*" as though his followers have no obligation to them. We're all in this thing together. Of course, people such as poet Ralph Waldo Emerson disagreed with Jesus. "Do not tell me... of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee... that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong."

---

Instead of the hard question, "How can we end poverty?" a more productive one may be, "**How can we help some escape poverty?**" And the answer seems to be by investment in what is needed.

For example, Africans are appreciative of U2 rock star Bono's compassion and help in times past. When there's a flood or drought or earthquake or genocide, massive charitable help is called for. But what Africans say they need more of is the opportunity to build up local economies. There are plenty of smart Africans who want to own small businesses, sell their products locally, even internationally.

An African woman, one who considers Bono a friend, once told him that if he sang one more stupid song about Africa, she was going to slap him. Why? Not only do such songs tend to make Africans look helpless, but such songs also are followed by an outpouring of charitable donations, needed or not. (And only needed if there is a disaster or whatever.) The charitable donations are delivered by charitable organizations, NGOs, who give away (for free) products and services that Africans can and should produce and market themselves.

And these charitable organizations tend to stay and stay in Africa. Why? Largely because they have contracts with the U.S. or a European country to help Africa. This is their business, how they make their living, unfortunately, at times, by killing the local economy. Some people call these companies *Poverty Inc.* In times of crisis, their services are most needed. But when that time is over, they need to move on. What is needed over the long-term is investment from abroad, including churches and individuals. Help local businesses, small businesses spring up and grow. This is what the Africans themselves say is needed.

"How can we end poverty?" is misdirected. This side of kingdom come some will always lack the power to thrive. Some need charity. Others can escape poverty if given a chance.