

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

CONTRIBUTOR NAME: MACKENZIE RICE

JUSTICE ISSUE: ECONOMIC JUSTICE; POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE/ LECTIONARY WEEK:	Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 25:1-13 NRSVUE
SOCIAL PRINCIPLES/ BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS REFERENCES:	¶161 Economic Justice, ¶161 Economic Challenges, B
OBJECTIVE:	Students will explore how withholding resources can block the flow of justice and consider how God calls us to share abundantly so all can flourish.
SUPPLIES NEEDED:	small, individually wrapped candies (or pennies), cups (or bowls or other scooping mechanisms), board/paper/poster to write on, student handout, Bibles/copies of the scripture, Handout (Social Principles)

LESSON PLAN STRUCTURE (1 HOUR)

CENTERING MOMENT (5 MINUTES)

Say: Think back over this past week. Where did you notice generosity? Maybe someone was generous to you, maybe you were generous to someone else, or maybe you simply witnessed an act of kindness.

(Invite students to share)

Say: Today we will read on e of Jesus' most surprising parables. It raises difficult questions about generosity, preparation, justice, and what faithful community looks like.

Pray:

God of abundance,

Thank you for all of the generosity from our week. We know that these moments are all moments where you were present, and we pray for attentiveness to continue to notice how your Spirit is at work. May your Spirit also be at work throughout our time together. Speak through our lesson to-day and illuminate your message to us. Amen.

NOTES

Prompt alongside any other weekly check-ins (e.g. sharing highs and lows): share a moment of generosity from this week that you saw, experienced, or shared.

Utilize a technique such as mutual invitation or tossing a beach ball/pillow/ other object to illustrate who is speaking and to invite active engagement from everyone.

Feel free to use this prayer, have a student read this prayer, or offer your own (or invite student(s))

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

SCRIPTURE STUDY (25 MIN.)

(Read Matthew 25:1-13 together. After reading, invite everyone to sit quietly for a moment.)

Ask:

- What stood out to you?
- What surprised you?
- What confused or challenged you?
- What questions does this story leave you with?

Discussion Questions:

(these are a wide range of options for whatever directions come up with/feel best for your group)

- What stands out to you in the text? What is confusing? What irks you?
- What are your main takeaways from this text?
- Wisdom, Foolishness, and Power: What do you think it means to be “wise” or “foolish” in this story? How is it decided? Have you ever been called foolish for doing something kind or generous? What happened? When is being “mindful of your own interests” a good thing, and when might it be harmful?
- God’s Role and Representation: If God is the bridegroom in this story, what does that say about how God treats people? Does that match your image of God? Why or why not?
- Community and Resource Sharing: Why do you think the wise women refused to share? Can you relate to their decision? Have you ever had to decide whether or not to share something important with someone else? How did you make that decision? What does this parable teach us—or not teach us—about helping people in need? What might have changed if even one of the wise women had shared her oil?

NOTES

Depending on group size and ability, utilize techniques such as “popcorn” reading or annotating (print the scripture ahead of time if needed). If annotating, instruct students to take notes based on key themes. Students can also read in pairs and make notes/discuss initial ideas together.

Traditionally, this parable is interpreted with an emphasis on its apocalyptic nature, concluding that Christ’s return will be unexpected, so we must always be prepared. Writing about these “judgment parables,” scholar Robert Farrar Capon notes they are not about who is “out” versus who is “in.” This lens challenges us to look beyond the traditional, face-value interpretations. We must think critically when interpretations limit God’s grace and generosity in any way. I hope students will voice what “irks” them in this parable, naturally leading to a more compassionate and contextually-grounded understanding.

There are many elements of this parable that “irk” me, personally, but here I will focus primarily on the behavior of the wise women. It is also important, however, to critically consider whether God is truly the bride-groom (Mark Davis notes “God the lurker; God the waiter-until-some-people’s-oil-is-spent; God the “gotcha! master”; God the forgetful —these are such unworthy ways of imagining God!”).

At the onset of this parable, there is nothing to distinguish the two groups of women; they are all invited to this wedding banquet, travel together, and fall asleep the same. Yet, once the wise women learn of the foolish women’s shortcoming, they turn their backs on them completely. The Greek word to describe the “wise” women is *phronimos*, defined as being prudent and “mindful of one’s interests.” In 1 Cor. 1:18-31, this same language of foolishness versus wisdom is used, but here it is written that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (v. 25) and that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (v. 27). This begs the question: by whose wisdom are these women wise? God’s generosity and grace can easily be

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

- Social Implications and Justice: How does this story connect to situations today where people are left out because they don't have enough? What modern systems or practices feel similar to the "door being shut" in this parable? What would it look like for a community to respond differently—more generously—to people in need?
- Is there a version of this story that you wish existed? What would happen in it?
- What can this parable teach us about how we show up for others in times of crisis or scarcity?

Say: The United Methodist Social Principles remind us that poverty and inequality are not simply personal problems, they are matters of justice. Christians are called not only to care for people in need but also to address the systems that create poverty and exclusion. Let's explore what that might look like.

GROUP ACTIVITY (25 MIN.)

Game Set Up:

Spread ~100 small, individually wrapped candies in the middle of the space. Alternatively, use pennies or other small, easy-to-pick-up items.

Split students into five groups:

1. Give 2 people some of the small items to start with (~5) and keep in their pockets during the scramble (or hold/set aside securely). Also give them shovels/cups/bowls/etc. to use to scoop items.
2. Give 20% of the group the same scooping mechanisms.
3. Tell 20% of the group they can only use one hand to pick up items.
4. Hold 10% of the group back, not allowing them to participate at all in the scramble.
5. The remainder of the group will participate "normally" in the scramble.

NOTES (CONT'D)

described as "foolish" by worldly wisdom, evidenced by the actions of the "wise" women as they, mindful of their own interests, send the women in need away.

This rejection is strange; the wise women did not send their kin back to their own homes or to the homes of other women nearby, which, scholar Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt notes, would be "the normal place one would go to replenish supplies of oil late at night." Their refusal to give oil is a corporate, anonymous initiative, quickly and decisively getting rid of these women they have newly ascribed an outsider-status to.

Matthean context is crucial to understanding this parable's polemic against women: Rosenblatt discusses one source of conflict at the time as women's behavior as spokespeople and the determination of their orthodoxy as prophetic teachers.

Rosenblatt asks, "Were the women themselves divided, and the male pastors 'forced' to exercise 'authority' by exiling some of the recalcitrant from the community?" In light of this, the harsh separation of the wise and foolish women served a specific pastoral interest of distinguishing the "welcome" women's qualities (i.e. submission) and assuring the community that any women's defection was explainable and irreversible. Ultimately, we are left with a stark image of the foolish women's rejection. The wise women do not have a say at the parable's end when the foolish return with oil, so it is possible they would have welcomed the women in at that point. But all we know is the devastating reality of their choice: their withholding of resources, despite any potential validity in that decision, inhibited half of their community from participating in and experiencing the banquet's joy, of which they all were invited to the same.

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

Game Play:

- With “go,” all participants will gather the items with the goal of collecting as many as possible (if using candy, tell students they can eat what they end up with at the end of the game).
- After all of the items have been collected, have participants report their wealth to the group. Record names and numbers on a sheet of paper/whiteboard/chart paper/etc.
- Once all individuals have been recorded, break the large group into three groups based on their wealth. Note how many items individuals must have to be in this group; the specific cutoffs will vary based on total group size.
 1. The **“great wealth and power”** group should be around 20% of the group
 2. The **“some wealth and power”** group should be around 30% of the group
 3. The **“little wealth and power”** group should be around 50% of the group
- Now, tell students they may give their items to others if they wish, but they are not required to do so. The students held back can participate in this part, asking their peers for items. Tell the group that those who do share will be honored as **“donors,”** with their names placed on the board.
- Allow a few minutes for participants to redistribute the items as they wish. Then ask for the names of those who gave away items and the amount each gave. List them on the board/chart. Ask if anyone changed groups as a result of giving or receiving items and record these shifts on the chart.

Game Debrief:

Discuss these questions as a group, or give students the option to discuss with partners/small groups and share takeaways with the large group.

NOTES

Supplies:

Approximately 100 wrapped can-dies or pennies. Bowls, cups, scoops, or small shovels, white-board or chart paper.

This activity intentionally creates unequal opportunities.

Be attentive to participants who may become frustrated. Remind everyone that the unfairness is part of the learning experience.

Variations of these groups based on available materials & group ability can include one group having to wear mittens, starting later, only being allowed to crab-walk, etc.

These groups are meant to loosely represent the five social classes in the US (elite class (1), upper class (2), middle class (5), lower-working class (3), poor class (4))

A rule about not touching one another during the collection period might be necessary to prevent physical skirmishes!

For example: with 20 students, the 4 students with the most items would be in group 1, the next 6 in group 2, and the remaining 10 in group 3.

These three groups loosely represent the economic classes in the US (upper class, middle class, lower class)

Remind students, too, that they will get to eat their candy (if using) and that the amount of items they have represent their wealth and power—that the amount they possess affects their livelihood.

This concludes the game; if using candy and allowing students to eat it at the end of the game, consider bringing out additional candy at this point—both to ensure students set aside to not participate can enjoy some candy and, perhaps, to model a form of “wealth redistribution.”

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

- Ask:**
- How did you feel about the way items were acquired/distributed?
 - Were you treated fairly? How did you feel about your situation?
 - What aspects of this game represent how the world's wealth and power are distributed?

Group Assignments:

- Which of the five groups were you originally placed in?
- Which of the three groups did you end up in?
- What do you think these groups represent? Were these groups fair?
- Is what happened to them similar to what happens to people around the world?
- How did the members of the different groups feel about their situation?

Redistribution:

- Did some people give items away? Did you give away or receive items? Why or why not?
- What determined whether or not people gave away items (knowing what the items represented; having your name displayed; feeling guilty; etc.)?
- Should the “haves” be concerned about the situation of the “have nots?” Why or why not?

Read the following Social Principles (see student handout) and continue the discussion with the following questions:

- ¶161 Economic Justice (section introduction)
- ¶161.B Poverty and Income Inequality (in Economic Challenges)

NOTES (CONT'D)

Again, these are a wide range of options for whatever directions come up with/feel best for your group!

Depending on group size and ability, utilize techniques such as “pop-corn” reading or annotating. Students can also read in pairs and make notes/discuss initial ideas together.

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

Ask:

- What are “the roots and effects of poverty?”
- How can we work toward their eradication?
- What does it mean “to be in active ministry with impoverished communities?”
- What is one step we can take to secure equal opportunities/meet human needs/eradicate unjust practices?

Say: Let’s reconnect and connect our discussion with our scripture passage today.

Ask:

- Are the wise bridegrooms embodying these social principles?
- Are they embracing “our charge to share the abundance of God’s creation in just and equitable ways?”
- How does their turning away inhibit others’ flourishing?

CLOSING MOMENT (5 MIN.)

Read Amos 5:21–24 (NRSVUE).

Ask: When does our “wisdom” serve as a dam in the flow of justice?

(Close by asking students to share a takeaway from today’s lesson with a partner and/or the group before ending in prayer.)

Pray:

God of justice and generosity,

We confess that too often, we call it wisdom when we protect what’s ours, even if it means someone else is left out.

We confess that too often, our preparation comes at the cost of someone else’s invitation.

But you are not a God who shuts the door—you are a God who throws it wide open.

NOTES

Feel free to use this prayer, have a student read this prayer, or offer your own (or invite student(s))

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

So, break down every dam we've built with our fear, our selfishness, our silence, and our "common sense."

Let justice roll down like waters.

Make us bold in generosity, tender in compassion, and faithful in building a world where all are welcome and all have enough.

Amen.

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST CONT'D

LESSON HANDOUT

¶161 Economic Justice

I entreat you, in the name of the Lord Jesus, act up to the dignity of your calling! No more sloth! Whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do it with your might! No more waste! Cut off every expense which fashion, caprice, or flesh and blood demand! No more covetousness! But employ whatever God has entrusted you with, in doing good, in every possible kind and degree to the household of faith, to all people! – John Wesley, “The Use of Money”

Our commitment to achieving economic justice is rooted in the covenantal understanding that God’s creation is meant to be shared by all humans and sentient beings. Just as the oikos or household served as the heart of the economy in ancient times, our belief in the inclusive nature of God’s global household motivates our pursuit of just, equitable, and sustainable economies.

As members of God’s oikos and followers of Jesus, who taught that we must “give to those who ask and not turn away from those who want to borrow,” we embrace our charge to share the abundance of God’s creation in just and equitable ways (Matt. 5:42). We, therefore, urge governments, businesses and civic associations to ensure that individuals, families and communities not only survive, but also thrive.

¶161.B. Poverty and Income Inequality, Economic Challenges

As United Methodists, we follow in the footsteps of our founder, John Wesley, who sought to improve the lives of those who suffered from debilitating conditions such as poverty, starvation, illiteracy, imprisonment, slavery, addictions and disease.

We decry the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the concentration of wealth in the hands of ever smaller percentages of the global population. We lament that too many of the world’s people lack the basic resources necessary for survival and pledge ourselves to work toward the eradication of the roots and effects of poverty. We further lament the multiple causes of poverty, such as war, famine, diseases and desertification.

We reject religious teachings that view the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God’s favor and poverty as a sign of God’s disfavor. We confess that we have not always heeded the words of Jesus, who preached good news to people living in poverty, taught that they were not far from God’s coming reign, and challenged the rich young man to give up all that he had to follow him (Luke 6:20; Matt. 19:23–25).

We commit ourselves to be in active ministry with impoverished communities by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and by supporting their efforts to secure equal opportunities and meet human needs, including food, water, health care and education. We reject preferential treatment in the church on the basis of wealth and income. We also commit to work toward eradicating unjust practices, policies, and systems that have condemned entire generations to live in unrelenting poverty.