



Convivial Life Together

Bible Studies on Vocation, Dignity and Justice



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

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Introduction to the Bible studies

Rev. Dr Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato, LWF Europe Secretary

The European Diaconal Process is exploring concepts and models for conviviality, which we understand to be ‘the art and practice of living together’, and the overcoming social divisions and exclusion. The background of growing violence and terrorism in Europe has reaffirmed the actuality of this concept. The Diaconal Process encourages work for inclusive and convivial neighborhoods, in contexts of diversity. In a workshop held in Manchester, in March 2015, the resource group of the Process (which called itself the “Solidarity Group” among diaconal actors in Europe) addressed what kind of economy the world would need to develop further towards conviviality. The Solidarity Group deplored how, at present, the world is driven by neo-liberal economic models that lead to an overall economization of life, and to a growing population finding themselves in vulnerable, often marginalizing situations.

Social media enable diaconal actors from across Europe to deepen their exchange, both on concepts and shared good practices. During 2016 the group will do further exploration of the theme: convivial theology – the theological basis of the conviviality approach to diakonia.

In this publication, six members of the Solidarity Group share the Bible study material that they have prepared for this theme. Throughout the Lutheran communion, getting into conversation with the Bible is a key element for developing contextual theology. Here, the social concerns and challenges in the authors’ local communities are brought into dialogue with theological



Seeking Conviviality – the team: Rev. Dr. Eva-Sibylle Vogel Mfato, Mag. Janka Adameová and Rev. Tony Addy
Photo: Gunnel Claesson

and spiritual insights, as well as good practice. They invite the reader to participate in a joint approach among believers, based on what the Biblical texts offer us, to address the needs and visions of people in dialogue with God’s visions for a convivial world.

Pastors and deacons working in diaconal congregations and institutions, and in diaconal formation have developed the Bible studies. They serve in very different countries and church contexts and local situations, but through the Diaconal Process, the participants have discovered how many challenges they have in common, in a globalizing world. Furthermore, they have discovered in one another a wealth of professional resources to be shared. Thus, these Bible studies written by authors from Latvia, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Norway and Sweden show differences in the ways

they are addressing key contextual issues, and in the perspectives that they offer. At the same time, they all relate back to the key themes that the resource group had identified for diaconal work in Europe: convivial life together, vocation, human dignity and justice. These ground laying aspects also structure the publication *Seeking Conviviality: Re-Forming Community Diakonia in Europe* – also available on this webpage.

With the publication and with the Bible studies, the European Diaconal Process Solidarity Group invites congregations, diaconal and advocacy actors to join the process and use the material as inspiration for their own reflection and work:

- Reflect how the conviviality themes apply to your own context.

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- Discover which theological issues come up that relate to your context. Which theological issues are implicitly behind what you see happening around you?
 - How will your theological discernment lead you back into a transformed and transforming practice?
- In their diversity, the Bible studies encourage us to follow the same grass roots approach to theology that starts with the experiences and needs at the local levels (see), followed by discerning the broader issues at stake and their theological meaning (judge), and that leads into diaconal and advocacy practice (act).

Vocation

The call to be active in diakonia

Three stories from the Gospel

Deacon Gunnel Claesson, Church of Sweden

And who is my neighbor?

Introduction

Jesus was a good story teller. When he wanted to make an important point, he often told a parable, a simple story illustrating a moral point. It's important to try and understand what such parables might mean to us here and now. But first we need to understand the context in which the story was told the first time.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan we find a radical call to be active in diakonia, or Christian service. You'll soon find it! It says, "Help the one in need". But is that Jesus' point? The answer might be both yes and no.

The Samaritans were a people despised by the Jews in the time of Jesus. Everything about the Samaritans was wrong. They didn't believe in God in the right way, they had a suspicious background, they didn't do things the way most people thought they should. Most everyone even avoided Samaria, the area where the Samaritans lived. They preferred to take the long way around rather than travel through the region.

Portraying a Samaritan in a positive light would have come as a shock to Jesus' audience. Read the text slowly. Try to pretend that you are a member of the majority population and feel the reaction among the people listening to Jesus.



Different faiths and good neighbors in Angered, Sweden. Photo: Gunnel Claesson

Luke 10:25-37 **The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his

wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denari and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Talk and act

Let’s go back to the question in the introduction. *“In the Parable of the Good Samaritan we find a radical call to be active in diakonia, Christian service. You’ll soon find it! It says “Help the one in need”. But is that Jesus’ point?”*

When Jesus wants to teach us how to act when we encounter people in need, he offers an example to follow – a man with a bad reputation, who is the subject of discrimination. Jesus says, do as he did!

- ✓ What groups of people are discriminated against, are seen to have a bad reputation or as a danger to society, in your context?
- ✓ What attitudes against other people in your community would Jesus oppose?
- ✓ The call to act comes from two different directions in the story. One comes from the man in need. The other comes from Jesus saying: “Go and do likewise”. How do we receive the call today?
- ✓ What form does the call to be active in diakonia take in your context here and now?



Put on your “Jesus glasses”! Photo: Gunnel Claesson

Exposure

- ✓ Go out into your community by yourself. Put on your “Jesus glasses” to try to see with his eyes. Sit or stand still for about one hour. Just observe the people and the environment and your own feelings.
- ✓ Go back to your group and tell one another what you have seen and felt.
- ✓ Is there a call to the Church in what you saw?

Two parties

Introduction

When we tell others about our experiences in life, we employ different tactics because of who we are and what we want them to know. When Mark tells us about Jesus he often uses contrasts to clarify his message. In this story you will be invited to two very different parties. In the first you’ll find yourself in the king’s house. King

Herod is not in a good mood. He is worried. People talk about a man called Jesus and that man gives him headaches and nightmares. There are rumors about this Jesus. Herod gets bad feelings hearing about it. He remembers that awful birthday of his some time ago. What a party – so full of greed, abuse, betrayal, fear, cowardice, revenge, violence and death. Yes, it ended with a man’s death, this preacher John, who he had respected and protected. How could all that happen?

Then you get an invitation to a totally different party. This one is about the Kingdom of God and if you listen carefully, you might hear a call to diaconal action!

1. Read “The birthday party” in Mark 6:14-29 slowly. Pretend that you are there. Try to see, hear, taste and feel what this party is about.
2. Read about the big party on the grass in Mark 6:30-44. Pretend that you are there. Try to see, hear, taste and feel what this party is about.

Mark 6:14-42 **The birthday party**

King Herod has heard the rumors, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Mark 6:30-44 **The big party on the grass**

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.



Shared bread. Photo: Gunnell Claesson

Talk and act

- ✓ What similarities can you find between the birthday party in the King's castle about 2,000 years ago, and the everyday news reporting of our time?
- ✓ Compare the two parties. What are the crucial differences when

it comes to power, status, and in the relationships between men and women, children and adults?

Diakonia opposes the values which ruled the birthday party. Let's go to the party where Jesus is in the center:

- ✓ Who were all these uninvited people who were so careless that they hadn't prepared food for a long day far from home? You must use your imagination!
- ✓ Pretend that you are one of the disciples. What would you do in a similar situation today?
- ✓ Use your imagination again. Who in your neighborhood are like these people?
- ✓ Jesus doesn't even respond to the disciples' suggestion. His only answer is surprising and almost provocative: **You give them something to eat.** That's a call to be active in diakonia! What is God's call in your context today?
- ✓ Conviviality is about living together. The Spanish word *convivencia* was used during medieval times in Spain when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived peacefully side-by-side, depending on and supporting each other. The story about the big party on the grass together with Jesus is also about conviviality. How can you act to nurture conviviality in your community?

An unpopular man – a diaconal worker?

Introduction

In Jesus' time, the country Palestine was occupied by the superpower

Rome. Of course, the people had to pay taxes. That was bad enough. The Romans employed Jews to collect the taxes. That was worse. A scandal! They were people who sold themselves to the enemy to earn money. That was treason and people like that were hated. This included Zacchaeus. He had become a lonely and rich outsider. No one who wanted to be accepted in society would talk to such a man. And they definitely would not eat with a man like him. In those days eating together was a way of saying, "We are close friends". That was out of the question!

Read the text in Luke 19:1-9 slowly. Pretend that you are a fly on the wall seeing and hearing what happens.

Read the text again. Now pretend that you are one of the people. Decide who you will be: Zacchaeus, one of the muttering persons or one of the guests.

Luke 19:1-9 Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Talk and act

Tell one another about your experience of being one of the people in the story.

Exposure

Go out into your community by yourself. Put on your "Jesus glasses" to try to see with his eyes. Sit or stand still for about one hour. Just observe the people and your own feelings.

Go back to your group and tell one another what you have seen.

- ✓ Who is a "Zacchaeus" in your community?
- ✓ When do you meet "Zacchaeus" in your church?
- ✓ It seems that Zacchaeus became a diaconal worker ready to help the poor. Jesus had treated him as an equal, expected him to do good. Discuss what good and bad expectations do to us and others.
- ✓ Compare the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 with the story about Zacchaeus. Both the Samaritan and Zacchaeus were outsiders. Discuss why. What is the word of God trying to teach us?

Dignity

Human Dignity

Reflections on poverty and dignity

Steinar Eraker, pastor/senior advisor, Church City Mission Oslo, Norway

Bible text: The poor widow

Introduction:

This Bible Study focuses on the concept of human dignity in light of the diaconal tradition of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and its attempt to re-form Christian service or *diakonia* in these times of economic change and marginalization in Europe. This re-formed understanding of *diakonia* can be found in the document ‘Seeking Conviviality – Re-forming Community Diakonia in Europe’ published by LWF in 2013.

The document states: “Dignity in Christian terms is grounded in the fact that the person is created in the image of God and the love of God extends to all. This implies that systems should not damage the dignity of people, whether they are systems of care or of employment or financial systems.”

Looking at different dictionaries, it is possible to list the following definitions of the word ‘dignity’ commonly used in English:

1. Innate/inherent/inalienable worthiness of respect and rights of a person;
2. Self-esteem of a person;
3. Position/status of a person.



In dialogue with a person asking for support. Photo: Church City Mission Oslo, Torstein Ihle

Initially, it seems as though the third definition contradicts the first one. At the same time, the first definition is understood as an objective statement, whereas the second very much describes a subjective experience. The third definition could indicate that status can differ from person to person; the first seems to indicate that we as persons are all equal in our worthiness.

Nevertheless, in this context the first definition comes closest to the quote from ‘Seeking Conviviality’, the document which stands as a basic guideline for this Bible Study. Thus, ‘dignity’ combined with ‘human’ can be understood in the following way: “Human dignity is not earned but is inherent in every human being. Human dignity is the God given intrinsic

value of being human – irrespective of class, race, gender, ability, nationality, culture, sex, religion, education, sexual orientation or any other division” (*One Body*, Vol. 2, Aids and the Worshipping Community, Christian Council of Norway, 2005).

Searching quickly through biblical texts, we see that dignity is often used in relation to the honor of a person. This connects to the third definition. In this context, Genesis 1: 27 is the foundation of the understanding of ‘human dignity’: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Bible text:

The Widow's Offering, Luke 21: 1-4 (New International Version (NIV))

21 As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Reflections:

This short story is found in Mark's gospel (12: 41-44) as well and should not be used to force poor people to give all their belongings to the temple (church)! It has more to do with how we value people. The rich offering their gifts were the ones who were used to being looked upon as dignitaries (another way of using the word dignity!), implying their special standing in society. With this story Jesus of Nazareth draws attention to a different kind of value system, one less focused on measuring the dignity of a person according to the amount of money they have. He brings attention to the fact that the widow donates funds although she has little compared to the rich, who most likely wouldn't notice the difference such a donation would make to their budget.

We are challenged on how we value people: through wealth, intellect, education, position, power, passport or inheritance, etc. Jesus compels us to look again at how we go about judging the value and dignity of different persons. As long as we can rate people differently, according to skills, education, wealth, and so on, we will



Sharing a meal at the Women's Night Shelter in Oslo. Photo: Church City Mission Oslo, Torstein Ihle

be able to argue that some people are worth more than others, and thus we will accept the injustices of economic, social and public systems. How do we prevent this?

This discussion has challenged the churches throughout the ages, and it will continue to do so. Luke's gospel focuses on poverty as an ideal of Christian conduct. At the same time, however, the churches have always argued for the right to own things. Then again 'greed' has been seen as one of the seven deadly sins. To find the balance somewhere in between seems to be difficult.

Questions for dialogue:

- ✓ With whom do you identify in this story?
- ✓ With whom do you identify your church/congregation in this story?
- ✓ Who is the 'poor widow' in your neighborhood?
- ✓ Who is the 'rich man'?
- ✓ How could the 'rich man' and the 'poor widow' work together?
- ✓ How do you rate people differently? What criteria do you use? Why?
- ✓ How is human dignity abused in your community?
- ✓ Does your church/congregation face issues around the abuse of human dignity?
- ✓ Search for other stories in the Bible about human dignity.
- ✓ How does convivial diakonia help you to understand that people from different creeds, religions, cultures, classes are all created in the image of God?
- ✓ Discuss the relationship between economically rich and poor churches in Europe, or in your community!

Debt and Dignity

Reading the Lord's Prayer in our context

Rev. Tony Addy, International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action (interdiac), Czech Republic

“Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven those who are in debt to us...” Mt. 6: 11-12

Looking at the Reality of Debt

Step 1: Exploring indebtedness in our locality

In some circles it is not polite to talk about personal finances! But since in Europe money is essential to maintain our daily lives perhaps as churches we should take more interest in it! After all, what is money but a symbolic means of enabling us to obtain goods and services in a marketplace? Money is vital even if we are able to provide some basic things by producing them ourselves. Money and bread are connected!

- ✓ When you think about debt and indebtedness in your locality, what is the concrete situation? Who is in debt and why? What are people's experiences? Do some have easier access and better conditions for borrowing than others?
- ✓ What do people say about debt in your community?
- ✓ Are there people who have to borrow money simply in order to have the very basic essentials of life such as food?

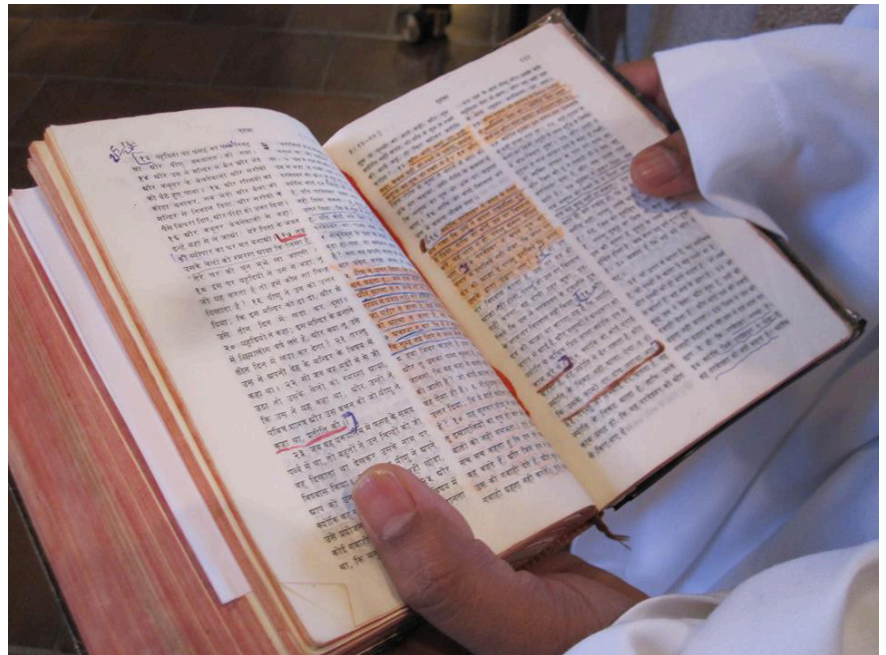


Photo: Gunnel Claesson

- ✓ Where do people borrow money from for these daily needs? Is it, in fact, possible to do so?
- ✓ Can people who are poor get a loan if they fall on hard times? And if so, what are the conditions? Are they the same conditions as those offered to the more affluent?
- ✓ Are there people who are in a crisis because they cannot pay back their debts? Which people? What debts? Why is this happening?
- ✓ Finally, what is the effect of debt on people's everyday lives and wellbeing? What do you think debt does to a person's dignity?

Action: Collect the information from conversations, meeting people in need, asking local social workers or other agencies that support people in need. Check out where you could borrow money if you were in urgent need. Find out what the conditions would be (or draw on your own experience if you have encountered difficult financial times).

Step 2: Bring the results together

- ✓ Share together what you found out. What new things did you discover about debt in your community? How does it affect people? What does it do to their dignity?

Step 3: Reading the text

- ✓ Read the text of the Lord's Prayer – even though it is so familiar to you! What strikes you about the prayer after your discoveries about debt? Keep in mind that the text is *really* talking about bread and debt! Often debt is translated as sin but we have to reckon with the fact that for Jesus' hearers the word meant "debt" – literally.

Background to the text:

Bread and debt were quite simply the two most pressing problems facing Jesus' listeners. Galilean peasants, day laborers and poor city dwellers usually faced the problem of bread and debt. If the reign of God was coming and it would address these two concrete issues then it would be truly beneficial to the poor.

The petition about debt is truly significant because it is one of those petitions which talks of a close interaction between the way people treat each other and the way God treats people. But it is not conditional! We do not forgive debts in order that God might forgive us our debts of sin but we forgive debts precisely because in God we know we are forgiven. The text stresses the fact that these actions take place at the same time.

There is a big confusion here because the word for debt and sin are interrelated and we find both words in different versions of the Lord's Prayer. This is no accident because of the impact of debt on the lives of people, families and communities and that link can be traced throughout the biblical story.

What is the background of this text? The formative event in the history of Israel was their release from slavery. The reason for this liberation was not primarily on the grounds of religion. The Israelites were slaves, yes – and



Village scene in Latvia. Photo: Martin Urdze

they were taken into slavery because they were in debt along with all who lived in Egypt and Canaan (see Gen. 47: 18-19). So the link between debt and slavery was burned into the consciousness of the Jewish people as a result of bitter experience (see also 2 Kings 4: 1-7). Having been liberated from slavery, debt slavery was to be avoided and so the traditions of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee were developed (Deut. 15: 1-11). This implied that every seven years people should be freed from their debt and slavery and thus have a new beginning. The Jubilee further implied that every 49 years land should be redistributed to the original owners, so there was no chance for large-scale landownership to develop. It is disputable whether the Jubilee was ever implemented, but it points to an important understanding of the common life (see, for example, Ex. 22: 25; Ps. 15; Lev. 25).

But we need to dig a little more deeply. Debt may lead to slavery – people in biblical times had to work to pay off their debts and they sometimes couldn't do it, for example, because the harvest failed. But the twist then as now, is that when you borrow

money you may pay interest and also may have to pledge something as collateral in case you cannot pay it back. So you pay interest and sometimes offer a pledge (like to a pawnbroker). Therefore, in the time of the Hebrew Bible, a farmer who defaulted on a loan may have lost both his farmland (which he probably pledged as security for the debt) and would have had to pay something back as well – so he became a slave. This mechanism is common in poor rural communities even nowadays. To see a biblical narrative where this is made plain, take a look at the story of Elisha and the poor widow (2 Kings 4: 1-7).

To summarize, in the Hebrew Bible, the charging of interest led to debt that could not be repaid, which then resulted in hunger, impoverishment and even slavery. The Hebrew Bible understands this as a primary sin. The liberation from slavery in Egypt was the first formative experience and led, as we saw, to the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions. The Babylonian exile was seen as God's punishment because the people did not follow the Sabbath year and forgive debts, the protective measure introduced after the experi-

ences in Egypt. Forgiveness of debt was linked to forgiveness of the basic sin of pushing people into debt slavery.

The text of the Lord’s Prayer is, therefore, very surprising to modern ears because it makes clear that, according to the Hebrew tradition, the responsibility lies with the lender to forgive the debts. The lender is the one who had the power and responsibility to lend. The one who needed to borrow was in a weaker position. This is a stark contrast to judgments made nowadays, when the borrowers are always blamed and put in the position of being the wrongdoer if they cannot repay a debt. The Hebrew Bible and the Lord’s Prayer put the responsibility on the lender. As debts are forgiven, so people can forgive debts of others.

(The text in the Lord’s Prayer about bread is equally radical. We should, according to the text, only think about enough bread for daily needs, not the storing up or hoarding of foodstuffs. Elsewhere, Jesus has quite harsh words to say about those who build barns and store up food beyond reasonable needs and this would resonate in a context where hunger was commonplace. Debt and sin are linked. It is a sin if people do not have their daily bread as a result of a lack of sharing

and/or of indebtedness. This is one reason why the early church emphasized “having everything in common”.)

Step 4: Bring the text and your context into discussion

If you reflect on debt in your context, and in the light of the Lord’s Prayer as well as the biblical witness, what do you think about it?

Debt can be a very effective way of controlling people! You don’t need to have direct slavery or even colonialism. If people are in debt and they get into difficulties, they know that they have to pay back the debt or suffer the consequences. This is a very good way of ensuring people will not challenge exploitative working conditions and do all they can to keep their jobs (if they have them).

Furthermore, many people without a job or in low-paid work, who need to borrow in order to survive, are in an even more perilous position. Failure to pay back the debt can result in loss of everything and even violence. On top of this poor people have to pay much more interest – in the United Kingdom cases of 6,000% are not uncommon – and may be in a kind of debt crisis

as although they pay back something each week but still the debt increases!

In addition to everyday needs, people borrow money to provide their family with a home. Often they have to borrow to the limits and when a crisis comes, (if the place where they work closes and they lose their job, or when interest rates soar), they cannot pay off the loan. Often in such conditions property prices fall. People end up homeless because they can neither pay the loan nor sell the house. It may also be that they sell the house but still owe money because of the fall in its value so they end up with no home and in debt.

Acting on indebtedness locally and nationally

Step 5: What could your response be?

For many in Europe the problems of bread and debt still demand a response in terms of securing the provision of bread and freedom from debt.

In the early church, people pooled their possessions to ensure that no one was in need (Acts 2: 44-45) and this shows how central the issue of bread and debt was to the early church communities.

Nowadays, we could think of three types of responses:

Support for people already or potentially in debt

- ✓ Do you now know enough about the situation of people in debt in your community? How big a problem is it? Do you need to do more research into the extent of the problem? Who else and which other organizations may be interested in this issue?



Church leaders express support for protesters against austerity
Photo: Church Action on Poverty

Possible Action: In communities where there is a problem with indebtedness, some churches have established debt advice centers or worked with others to do so; local awareness raising about the dangers of excessive interest rates and indebtedness have also been developed.

Creating a just and transparent alternative

- ✓ Is there already a possibility for poor people or those on the margins to borrow money for basic needs or emergencies in your area? Is there a need for a local system of financial support?

Possible Action: In Britain the churches are involved in working with congregations and local communities to create “credit unions” – local saving and loan institutions.

Campaigning for a just credit system

- ✓ What organizations and groups in your community are also interested in the impact of debt and high cost lending in your community? Is it of wider interest in society? What alliances and campaigns could be developed to address this issue?

Possible Action: In some countries the churches with civil society have

campaigned politically to stop lending at excessive interest rates.

For further reflection

In this Bible study we have looked at personal and household debt but countries are often indebted and this debt is often an investment in the future. Furthermore, in the modern economy, debt is linked to the operation of the global financial system and the lack of regulation at this level. Also, when states borrow because they are in difficulty, conditions are imposed which make it difficult for the people but also states have to ensure the viability of banks, which pushes the state (people) into debt. This is a topic for further reflection.

The story of Naomi and Ruth

A covenant between two women

Rev. Szilárd Szabó, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary

Introduction – The Book of Ruth

From time to time we need to escape certain places. Experts mention two reasons for such journeys: natural factors and human conflict.

From ancient times people have depended on nature for their survival. If the weather is good, things go well. If not, they must travel to a place where there is enough food and water.

There have always been conflicts and wars, and there always will be. The reasons are manifold, and so are the consequences. Where the basic conditions for everyday life are not present, there is no choice but to look for a place that is suitable for survival.

The book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible takes the reader to the Middle East, telling the story of Naomi who has to leave Bethlehem, the city where Jesus will be born, because there is not enough food to feed her family. Naomi leaves her motherland with her husband, Elimelek, and sons, Mahlon and Kilion. They go to Moab.

However, Naomi's husband, Elimelek, dies in Moab. Soon after, her two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also pass away. So Naomi is left alone, without her family, without her loved ones.

Before they die in Moab, the sons marry two local girls, Ruth and Oprah. Following the death of their husbands, they remain with their mother-in-law, Naomi. When Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem. Oprah heeds Naomi's advice and goes home to her



Migrants in Kletín Station, Budapest. Photo: Zsuzsanna Bolla/lutheran.hu

parents but Ruth stays with Naomi and they travel to Bethlehem together.

Ruth says:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

(Ruth 1, 16b)

The story of these two women has a good ending in Bethlehem. Ruth marries Boaz, a relative of Naomi. He is an important player in the story because he allows Ruth to collect the residue from the fields at harvest time, thus providing food for herself and her mother-in-law. Several times Boaz could have taken advantage of

the women's vulnerability but he does not. He is compassionate, supportive and attentive. Boaz makes certain that Ruth always returns home with sufficient food.

Interpretation for today

The story can be read from various perspectives. The actors cross each other's lives at different points, and it is interesting to think what might happen next. Can we identify with at least one figure in this story?

Naomi's way

Naomi has to leave her everyday life because there is a famine in Bethlehem. She has to live in a foreign country, as a newcomer. Today, we would say she is a refugee. She is vulnerable and defenseless, in a different culture. She also loses her family in a very short period of time. Those who are most important in her life, her husband and sons, are gone.

At that time there was no social "safety net", at least not in the current sense. A widow was particularly vulnerable. Without any relatives she could only count on herself.

- ✓ What does it mean to be alone in a foreign country?
- ✓ Where can one find help, support in a foreign country?

- ✓ A woman alone is in a precarious situation in some places. What do you think about that?

Ruth's way

Ruth has to make a very difficult decision. Should she go back to her family, and start a new life or stay with Naomi whatever happens? As we know, she decides to stay with her mother-in-law. When she follows Naomi to Bethlehem, she also becomes an immigrant.

Ruth could have chosen to start a new life. Naomi explicitly encourages her to do so. But she loves Naomi, so she supports her even in a very difficult situation. Ruth's loyalty, as she follows Naomi, is extraordinary. Only true, sincere and unconditional love is capable of such a sacrifice!

- ✓ Have you ever made important life decisions?
- ✓ How can you support someone else?
- ✓ What does Ruth's decision mean to you in your context?

Boaz's way

Boaz behaves generously, helping an immigrant woman unselfishly. As a wealthy, respectable man he could stop Ruth from collecting the gleanings from his field. He could abuse the

situation. However, he uses his wealth in a good way. Without his help and support Naomi and Ruth would be in a hopeless situation.

- ✓ In your context, what kind of needs do you see?
- ✓ How do the wealthy people behave? Can you ask for help?
- ✓ How can one use one's wealth in a good way? Can you give an example?

Issues to be discussed

- ✓ Who are you in this story?
- ✓ If you met Naomi, what would you do?
- ✓ If you met Ruth, what would you do?
- ✓ What do you think about the special relationship between Ruth and Naomi?
- ✓ Give an example in which two people from different countries or cultures collaborate for a good cause!
- ✓ What resources do you draw upon to help someone who is different from you?

Justice

Everyone gets what they need to live fully

About God's justice on earth

Deacon Fritz Blanz, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany

The workers in the vineyards

Basic exegesis

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Preliminary remark: This parable centers on the kingdom of God. While you might be tempted to understand this concept as life after death, that would be short-sighted. In the Old Testament texts the vineyard is understood as an earthly reality for God's people. According to the New Testament, including passages such as Timothy 2: 4, ("God wants all men to be helped"), people should get a foretaste of the kingdom of God here on earth. Our lives should be lived in a way that awakens a longing for the kingdom of God in our neighbors. That is how our credibility is measured.

There are four learning experiences in the parable:

1. From the unjust structures and equitable salary

The parable points to unjust structures. All people want to work but few get work. Only over the course of the day does the injustice gradually disappear.

Work is an essential form of participation in society. Those who do not get work are excluded from society.



Wine harvest in Moselle. Photo: Rob & Lisa Meehan (CC-BY-SA)

What is surprising is the salary at the end of the day – "a silver dime". That means the vineyard owner gives all workers exactly the same wage. This was a practice that was necessary at the time in order for the workers to be able to feed their families for a day. Everyone gets the same wage and that is perceived by some others as unjust. This happened even though some worked longer hours. It is noticeable that the work is separated from wages. Can it work? Socialism teaches us that this is a "failed model". In a Christian community it should work. But it doesn't! Yet the parable reveals to us something of the ethic in the kingdom of God – and it is contrary to the ac-

cepted way of the world. And therein lies a blessed tension.

2. Definition: Justice means everyone gets what they need to live fully

Justice is about the distribution of society's resources, how people are paid for what work they perform, how others are treated, whether they have enough to live on. The establishment of such justice is essential in God's kingdom. In the Parable of Talents in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 25: 14-30), we gain a glimpse of God's realm; and we gain a sense of God's justice in the story of the Last Judgment ("what you have done unto

one of these, my brethren, you did it to me”). The Parable of the Talents ends with the sentence “whom much is given, of him they will ask a lot”. Each passage addresses the subject of justice.

3. Fair treatment provokes resistance because the earthly sense of justice does not match the biblical

We all have different ideas of justice. This is true for us as a solidarity group in The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) as well as for parishes or diaconal staff. Some require that everyone should be treated according to their behavior. Under this thinking, whoever works a great deal needs to gain a great deal. Whoever does little work should get little or nothing. We often argue along the same lines in terms of punishment of those who are guilty of some offence. That kind of thinking may make sense according to earthly logic but it is not the logic of the parable.

The biblical ethic speaks to the right to life, livelihood and basic income for every person. The parable is silent on the subject of whether the last workers are in debt or at fault in any way, whether they were lazy or industrious, whether they would be able to afford working at the given rate or not. That was not the important part of the story. It would detract from the core of the message.

Therefore, there is conflict between the human understanding of justice and the message of Jesus and this necessarily leads to protests. And that’s good because, according to Jewish tradition, the search for the truth usually is connected to a controversial debate. So we need the conflict. The question is, will it be a destructive or constructive debate?

4. Our mission

Certainly Jesus sparked debate with his parables, which were sometimes

seemingly incomprehensible. We face the same dilemma as we seek to understand the parables today. We cannot expect our commitment to justice for all to enjoy the same opportunities in life to be accepted by everyone. And, I do not want to call for a confrontation on such issues, but for an active participation in addressing the question of justice. However, such a position may well be provocative sometimes!

5. Excursion to justice

Everyone should receive what they need to live a full life. We learn this in different passages throughout the Bible. Just think about the story of the manna God provides in the desert for the Israelites (Exodus 16: 2). Everyone receives their daily ration. Whoever takes too much sees the food spoiled. That offers further reflection on the parable.

What can we learn from the European definition of poverty, which indicates that you are poor if 60 percent of your income is spent on basic needs such as food, clothing and housing? What about social participation?

6. Pedagogical considerations

Justice is a critical issue for young people. Much is demanded of them but they often learn little about justice

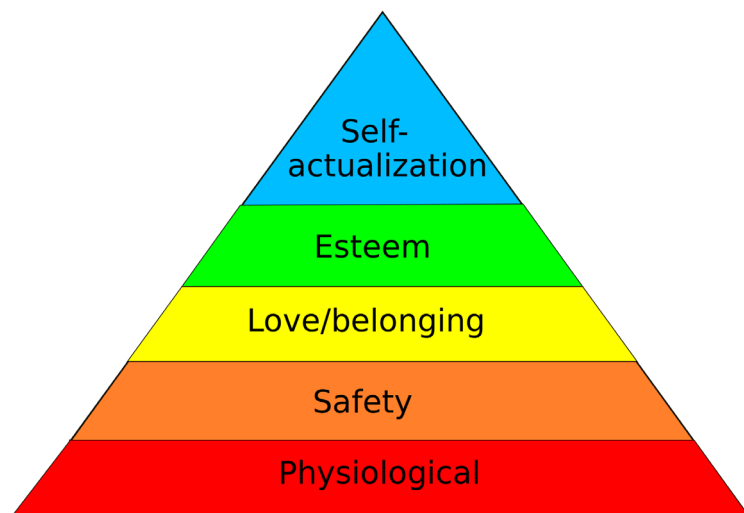
from society. They are considered to be neither children nor adults. In many situations they are powerless against the adult world – and so they rebel. It is a protest against injustice. Thus, they link questions of justice with their own lives. We need to give satisfactory answers to young people on the question of justice. The credibility of our church depends on it.

7. Pedagogical Questions

- ✓ Where would you discover injustice in your own environment?
- ✓ Have you personally experienced injustice?
- ✓ How do you define injustice?
- ✓ What do human beings need to live fully?
- ✓ How does God’s justice differ from our expectations?

Ideas for implementation

- **Example** – *Hierarchy of Needs* by Maslow.



Hierarchy of Needs by Maslow

✓ Question: Which of your needs have been satisfied? Where would you fit in Maslow's pyramid? What about other groups in your community, village or city? What about a lonely elderly person in a rural area or a business owner? What about a homeless child in east Africa?

✓ Do you have any ideas on how you could achieve more justice in your environment?

• **Example** – Leo Tolstoy: Read or listen to the story of Martin the Shoemaker. Which parts of the story talk about justice? What does Tolstoy want to tell us with

the story? (Christ meets us in the neighbor, see also Matt. 25: 31ff.)

• **Example** – Bible Sharing

✓ Read the text, having the participants repeat certain passages several times to reinforce the message.

✓ Have participants share about what has particularly moved them and what they would like to incorporate into their daily lives.

✓ At the end of the session, ask participants to make one change in their lives, something that is doable and not an overwhelming prospect.

✓ At the next meeting, have participants share how they have succeeded, and where they might have needed support to do better.

Conclusion

1st In God's justice each person receives what they need to live a full life.

2nd In service to others God meets us. And people learn something of the reality of the kingdom of God. Therein lies our mission.



Delegates of the Trondheim Church Leadership Consultation make a 'Climate Justice Pilgrimage' from the Trondheim Free Church to Nidaros Cathedral, Norway, May 13, 2015. Photo: LWF/Ryan Rodrick Beiler

Austerity Talks about the Bible and life

How the Bible challenges economic practice

Rev. Martin Urdze, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia

See – Austerity in context

How have you experienced austerity measures in your country? How have you survived the “crisis” up to now?

Allow each participant in the group to speak about his or her experiences. If there is only time for two or three people to tell their stories at one session, continue next time. There’s no need to rush. It is important to hear each participant’s story. It is critical that participants speak about their own personal experiences, not offer the official media version regarding austerity. For this to happen there needs to be trust among the group members. There may be hurtful experiences to talk about. Perhaps a family member has had to travel to another country to earn a living. Or maybe someone has had to sacrifice their flat because of debts. After stories have been shared, other group members may ask questions without getting in a discussion or proposing solutions to questions that haven’t been asked. It is possible to film the stories and include the footage as a part of a wider film project.



Work migration from Latvia leaves behind abandoned homes and the older generation. Photo: Martin Urdze

Think – A view from the Bible

2.1. Why must there be austerity measures? What explanations have you heard?

Collect comments made by politicians and economists about austerity in your country. Then create your own television news stories, such as “Sweet news from the heart” or “Everything is getting better, the country’s reforms are a real success story”.

You just need one person to broadcast the news, a desk, a video camera and the operator.

Compare your own experiences with the official statements. What differences do you see?

Why is it that politicians and economists often seem to live in another world?

2.2. A different view from the Bible “The parable of the unmerciful servant” – Matthew 18: 21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not

seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The New Revised Standard Version, 1989

Step 1: Have different readers read the text three times

Step 2: Questions for group discussion:

✓ Are there things that you don't understand?

✓ What is the context of the parable? What happens before and after the story?

✓ Try to divide the text into smaller units. What kinds of situations are there (change of place, participants, time)?

✓ Who is participating in each scene?

Comments

Normally this story is read as an exhortation to forgive sins. Forgiveness is an essential spiritual act. To Peter's question about how many times he should forgive, Jesus answers that it should be 77 times. This is a contrast to Genesis (4: 27) where Lamech says: *“If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.”*

But there are also other possible interpretations of the text. The number seven is very important in so-called Sabbath economics as we see in Exodus (15-17) and in the proclamation of the Jubilee in Leviticus (21), after seven times seven years all slaves should be released, debts forgiven and expropriated land given back to its former owners. We can also see this close connection between the forgiveness of sins and the release of debts in the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus says: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” The Aramaic word *‘hova’* can have both meanings – debt and sin (see Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthaeus*, Teilbd. 3, Mt. 18,1-25,46, Zuerich,1997, S. 69).

In order to understand the parable we have to understand the situation of the people to whom Jesus was speaking. He addressed mainly poor people in Galilee, a region that was famous for its rebellious spirit. Galilee

was occupied by Roman forces. There was huge pressure on the people to pay different taxes. Debt was a serious problem for many people. If there was one small financial problem, they couldn't pay their debts. That meant that they had to sell their property, lose their land and then they might easily have become slaves. Lenders used harsh means to get their money back. Debtors were put into prison where they had to live in horrible conditions until their family members or friends found the money to pay off the debt.

If we understand how big the debt of the first slave actually was, the story becomes even more telling. He owed 10,000 talents. One talent was worth 10,000 dinars. One dinar was the daily income of a worker. A slave cost between 500 and 2,000 dinars.

So the amount of his debt was 100 million dinars, or approximately \$1.2 billion. How on earth is it possible to get such a huge debt (see *Eta Linnemann, Gleichnisse Jesu, 2. Aufl. d. Kurzausg., Goettingen, 1982, S. 106?*)

It means that the servant wasn't an ordinary slave. He was at least a minister with a lot of power in a big empire. Slaves could be in very different positions.

This particular slave must have made gross miscalculations (we would say, speculated) to lose such an enormous amount of money. When he says to the king that he will pay everything back, everybody would have known that this wasn't possible. The only way to get the money would be through fresh speculation.

Sadly, in our world this kind of economic suicide has become reality. (For example see: <http://bit.ly/1QTXveK>)

For discussion:

- ✓ Why did the lord forgive the debt of the first slave?
- ✓ What can be done if there are people who exploit the grace they have received?
- ✓ What kind of treatment do today's small debtors receive?
- ✓ How many of the banks that were responsible for the most recent financial crisis had to bear the consequences of their actions?
- ✓ What does this parable tell us about God?
- ✓ What is the relationship between debt release and the forgiveness of sins? What is similar? What is different?
- ✓ How does God's grace influence our relations with our fellow citizens? How important are grace and forgiveness in our society compared to justice and equal opportunity?
- ✓ How can a congregation or a church influence economic processes?

Act – The Biblical story in your context

Make a modern film version of the parable of the unmerciful servant.



The group "Talks about the Bible and life" at The Congregation of the Cross, Liepaja, Latvia. Photo: Martin Urdze

3.1. Write a script. Discuss the different scenes. What could be a contemporary setting for the story? Write it down and elaborate any initial ideas.

3.2. What kind of roles do you need? Try to find every member of the group a suitable role.

3.3. What attributes are important for every scene?

3.4. Play every scene again to improve it. Have group members who are not participating in a scene give their feedback.

3.5. Film every scene at least twice. Later you can choose the best version. You can also cut the film if there are people in the group who have the skills and if you have the necessary computer programs.

3.6. Invite people from your congregation and from your community to the premiere of the film and have a party!

As an example of a news cast created by such a study group, see the video of "Talks about the Bible and life" from the Cross congregation Liepaja, Latvia: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBpfohYjOD4 .

For a Latvian adaption of the parable, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwNX4Smt60E .

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