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Reformation
Peace, Seattle
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OCCUPYING THE PUBLIC SQUARE

So where do you stand on "OCCUPY WALL STREET"?
Are you curious? Ambivalent? Inspired? Incensed? Confused? A bit of each, maybe?

Six weeks after chants of **"WE ARE THE 99"** began, the movement has successfully dragged the issue of economic inequality and corporate greed back into the public square. And not only in this country, but in major cities around the world. Yet it's far from clear where the movement is headed or how long it'll endure.

It's certainly got civic leaders' attention. Mayors, city councils, police chiefs—they're all walking a tightrope; trying to strike a balance between support for a movement many have sympathy for, while adhering to the rule of law, and figuring out how they're going to foot the bill.

Since this is America, it didn't take long for a counterattack against Occupy Wall Street protests to emerge. **One group calls itself "the 53 percent,"** referring to a claim that only 53 percent of Americans pay income taxes, the implication being that the other 47 percent are freeloaders & whiners.

Last week, Tony, a Lutheran seminarian I know, sent me television footage of religious leaders from every stripe (including himself) walking through San Francisco's banking district in their clericals, carrying a **gold-painted bull** on a platform.

In symbol and speech they were making a not so subtle connection between Wall Street's preoccupation with a BULL MARKET and the GOLDEN CALF Israel forged in the desert when they thought God wasn't looking.[1]

As many have pointed out, "THE MARKET" has more than a few things in common with the world's mystery religions, whose secret ceremonies were known only to initiated insiders, and who through their secretive cultic practices sought some form of salvation.[2]

So, is the growing disparity between rich and poor in this country and around the world real? By every statistical measure, yes.

One recent study of 31 developed nations found distribution of wealth in the United States to be the most unequal among all the nations examined. On a combination of issues including poverty prevention, health, and access to education, the U.S. ranked in the bottom five (out of 31).

And that trend is only growing. More than 17 percent of U.S. households now fall below the poverty line and over a quarter of U.S. households are in economic distress.[3]

The gulf in this country between the "haves" and the "have nots" is most definitely widening.

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[1] You can check out the footage by following these links: http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/video?id=8404287&syndicate=syndicate&section and http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/video?id=8403665&syndicate=syndicate&section

[2] Christian Research Institute, http://www.equip.org/articles/mystery-religion

[3] Cited by the Associated press. http://hosted2.ap.org/RIPRJ/6397c79c7d3340859b7550b24c166e13/Article_2011-10-28-Occupy-Glance/id-f3ec506221da497aa626f33da95496d8 Another source puts the US poverty rate at 12.65% and maintains that 1 of 5 Washington State families are unable to meet their basic needs. http://www.povertyaction.org/priorities/povertycausesfaq.cfm

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Fact: 25 of the 100 highest paid CEOs in the U.S. earned more in salary last year than their companies paid in federal income tax.[4]

Fact: Median CEO pay jumped 27% in 2010 as compensation worked its way toward pre-recession levels. Those pay hikes came even though the economy's recovery remains frail, unemployment is high, and corporate profits last year were roughly flat.[5]

Fact: Because executive pay follows benchmarks that have more to do with peer salaries than actual job performance, CEO pay inflation is bound to continue to make huge leaps forward.
It's called "The Lake Wobegon effect…" all the salaries are "above average."[6]

But if we want true corroboration that more and more people are having to survive on less, we don't need to do sophisticated research, we can just ask Audrey or one of the Peace volunteers who hands out food at the White Center Food Bank. **What do they tell us?** The lines are getting longer, more people are being served, and that trend is not expected to change for years to come.

The P.I.'s Neal Starkman summed it up this way:

> Occupy Wall Street people "are angry for a variety of reasons, but chief among those reasons is that many of them have no jobs and very little money while others are hauling in seven figures and more each year. After that, it gets a little murky."[7]

Murky is a good descriptor.

While the **"We are the 99"** mantra taps into that anger, it "irks the sympathy right out" of some because it suggests the **"99"** have nothing to do with the problem. Danny Westneat writes:

> "Are we 99 percenters going to blame all that ails us economically ONLY on the 1%?
> Did no one in the 99 percent lie on their loans? Or buy way too much house? [Or] rack up too much debt on flat screens or second homes?"[8]

He's got a point. **And there's at least one other writer who agrees with him.**

St. Paul, applying a kind of "theological arithmetic" in his letter to the Christians in Rome, says that when it comes to living up to who and what we're supposed to be and do, there is no 99% vs. 1%. 100% of us have missed the mark. [Rom. 3:23]

If we're looking for a place to stand that keeps us somehow in the clear of culpability, we're just not going to find it. Self preservation is at the heart of the systems we build to insure our survival; they are designed to protect ourselves and to insure our futures at the expense of the neighbor.

Ever wonder why God issued two commandments on the topic of coveting what belongs to our neighbor?

Capitalism has been so successful because its principles are built around that basic reality.

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[4] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/31/us-usa-tax-ceopay-idUSTRE77U0KW20110831
[5] http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/story/CEO-pay-2010/45634384/1
[6] Peter Whoriskey, *Washington Post*, 10-3-2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/cozy-relationships-and-peer-benchmarking-send-ceos-pay-soaring/2011/09/22/gIQAgq8NJL_story.html
[7] Neal Starkman in his *Seattle Post Intelligencer* Blog, 10/19/2011: http://blog.seattlepi.com/nealstarkman/
[8] Danny Westneat's *Seattle Times* column, 10/11/2011: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/dannywestneat/2016474631_danny12.html

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Tax cuts for the wealthy and deregulation of the financial industry are not surprising at all; they are natural downstream consequences of our human tendency (brother Martin called it our BONDAGE) to remain curved in on ourselves, using whatever power we have at our disposal to preserve an advantage.

Is the crisis we now face, not only here but around the world, an economic crisis only? Is it not also a spiritual crisis? And a moral one?

On a day when we return to the protestant (NOTE: the word PROTEST is embedded in the name protestant!)…on a day when we return to the protestant roots of the Lutheran movement, it seems to me this is the kind of question we ought to be talking about.

Brother Martin began his protest in Wittenberg because he believed the teachings and practices of the church had become unmoored from the gospel. The practice that motivated his protest was both a spiritual and an economic one: the manipulative and systemic misuse of indulgences (a kind of "get out of purgatory free" card) as a means of extorting money for Vatican building projects.

Not only did Rome's policies encourage people to believe that their actions would secure salvation for their deceased relatives, ("a coin in coffer clings, a soul heavenward springs"); the offer of indulgences compelled people to spend money they didn't have, and left their families without the resources to care for basic needs.

And it wasn't only the church's practice that caused Luther alarm. He was also alarmed,

> "by the growing gap between the wealthy few who benefited from an unregulated… economy and the many poor who were ignored by the wealthy or governed by unscrupulous rulers who failed to care for their most vulnerable subjects."
>
> "Where no state regulation of business exists, [said Luther] there is nothing but 'a bottomless pit of avarice and wrongdoing.'"[9]

According to Samuel Torvend, "Luther argued that it was the responsibility of the state…to propose and enforce just laws and practices that benefit the many, especially the most vulnerable."[10]

Listen to what Brother Martin says about the connection between the Sacrament of the Table and care for the neighbor:

> "This sacrament is a sacrament of love. Love and service are given you and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ… all the unjust suffering of the innocent, which fills the world: You must fight, work, pray, or at least have heartfelt sympathy."[11]

So, when our governor and our legislators grapple later this month with another 2 billion dollar hole in the state budget, and a proposal to (among other things) completely eliminate the state's Basic Health Plan, ending state-subsidized insurance for 35,000 of our most economically vulnerable citizens, what are we to do?[12]

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[9] LW 45:270, cited in Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor, Gathered Fragments*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008) p. 120
[10] *Luther and the Hungry Poor*, p. 122.
[11] Martin Luther, *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament*, 1519. LW 35.
[12] *Seattle Times* 10/27/11 http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2016627558_budgetcuts28m.html

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For Christians, it's not enough to say, "the system is working for me, therefore I'm fine with the status quo." The question the gospel compels us to ask is: Is the system working for my neighbor? For a growing percentage of us, the answer is, NO.

"If you continue in my word," Jesus says, "you are truly my disciples; you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

"FREE? WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'FREE,' JESUS? WE'VE NEVER BEEN SLAVES TO ANYONE!

Oh, really!

This is a conversation, like so many in John's gospel, that takes place on many levels at once. It's personal, it's communal, it's theological, it's practical, it's simple, it's complicated, and yes, it's murky.

In fact, it sounds a bit like the whole conversation that's begun around OCCUPY WALL STREET.

Jesus didn't shy away from controversy. He didn't back off complicated issues, nor sit them out. And neither should we.

As murky and complicated as the whole thing is, the church belongs there, in the muck; because our Lord is there. Searching for ways to lead us from places of bondage toward a way of life that truly is life—life for us, life for our neighbor, life for the world.

Let us pray:
Reforming God, you love us too much to leave us where we are at. So, set us free.
Bring us out of our bondage to where you are, and let us stand there with you; and speak and act in ways that demonstrate that we have heard you; and we are ready to follow. In Jesus' name.

Amen.