

## **He Became, That We Might Become** *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*

### **The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor, Part 5: Jesus' People and Economic Empowerment** **2 Corinthians 8:12 – 15**

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#### **Introduction: Dira and Saranya's Story**

As we start into this Scripture, I've asked Dira and Saranya to share with us their homebuying journey. Many people in our community and beyond have helped in that journey.

*Saranya: Two years ago, a friend of ours, Carla, who attends Neighborhood Church, was talking to both of us. Because both of us had this vision of owning a home and building community and wanting to share resources with other people. I can speak for myself, this is a dream that I've had for more than 10 years. There have been different moments that have come up where there was an opportunity buy or invest. At the time, I just thought that it was a good investment. I didn't want to pay rent anymore. I wanted to build equity. The journey that Dira and I have been on for the last 2 years has been so much more than that.*

*When Carla planted the seed of – hey, you are both wanting to live out this vision, why don't you think about doing this together? So we began our journey of talking to different people within our communities, seeking out support. Because who buys a house with a friend? It seemed pretty unusual. We talked to a million people – Mako and Ming about what are your values; like how do you actually live together; talking through the most basic, mundane, everyday things, but that really matters. So we sought counsel from so many people in our community. People have supported us in ways that go beyond what we could have asked or imagined. Support in terms of coming up with our partnership agreement. Support in terms of mental and emotional support, like getting through the hurdles and obstacles of our own fears of buying and owning a property. Carla, Laura, and Leslie have been incredible in terms of offering that kind of emotional support. And I think there have been so many people who have blessed us financially, as well. In this last stage of our journey, actually buying our house. It's just been incredible to see how people have shown up in community. It's not just building equity. It's sharing resources, what you have, so that everyone in our community can flourish. It doesn't feel like just the two of us are buying this house. It feels like everyone in our community is buying this house.*

*Dira: I think Saranya pretty much covered it all. But I think I just wanted to share what felt significant to me in regards to the support that we received. I've always wanted to buy a home. My mom – I didn't expect to get emotional – my mom has never owned a home and still hasn't. It's been a dream of mine forever to be able to do that. But I think, when I started the journey, part of the support system has been like, financially I couldn't afford it. I had a lot of debt. Living in Christian community with Carla and Laura making space for me and Leslie, and then Ming and Mako at an affordable rate – and I think being able to live like that, where there are Christian communities who said, "We'll house you affordably so that you can achieve those goals." I felt like, "That's a step forward to being able to do that because I'm drowning in a lot of student debt, and I have a lot of debt, and I can't afford it. So that's really significant. The next challenge was, after I paid off my debt, as a single person in the city of Boston, I couldn't afford to do that. I looked at every which way to do it on my own. That made me even more sad. This is my home. I've been here most of my life. And I can't afford to live here. And I want to remain here. So I have start looking at the outskirts. I didn't want to do that. It's not my heart's desire. This is the community I want to be in. This is my home. This is where I've had memories, like childhood memories. And this is the community I want to serve, and be in. Those are some of the challenges. Just emotionally, in terms of support, a lot of people have prayed for us, but then encouraged us to take alternative ways to doing that. That's why we decided to partner.*

*We're not going to stand for you guys being pushed out. Instead, we're going to find other ways to support you to take that leap of homeownership. That's felt like the most significant for me: just the mental barriers of, "Can we actually do this? As like two single women? We had a lot of mental hoops, of like,*

*what if everything breaks down in the house? What are we going to do? Every step of the way, people said, "We're here for you. There are ways to get around that. There are ways that we'll support you. You don't have to worry about those things, even if they do come up." That has been significant for me in this journey. I'm beyond grateful because it's beyond what I could have even imagined being able to receive on this journey. We're supposed to close this Friday on our home. I didn't think it would ever happen. Really, we couldn't do it without everyone in this community, and all the communities we're a part of. That just feels like, God loves us, in the ways He's supported us.*

*For us, too, we feel it as an act of justice and resistance of being pushed out of a community that we want to be in. Everyone came alongside of us to do that, to make sure that that doesn't happen. I'm thankful.*

We just praise God because these are two remarkable people. And they invested in themselves as well. I think they underplayed that. I'm personally grateful for the many other people that came along.

### **Relevance**

The title of this series is, *The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor*. And we want to talk about tangible ways in which that happens. The title of this particular message is Jesus and Economic Empowerment. The passage we read talks about that. Dira and Saranya's story talks about that. I want us to remember that and hold onto that because the reality is that in the U.S. and in many other countries, you're able to be more generous in the long haul, if you own a home. The cost of renting just kind of saps wealth. Wealth is important, but wealth in particular on the empowerment of others and the chance for people to be generous, like Jesus was generous with us. Jesus empowers us to be generous. This is not the only way to do that, or think about it. But in this particular case, given who they are, and the hopes and dreams of folks around them, that's how it looked. And that's one of the ways we have to understand the Lord hears the cry of the poor.

We started this series on Labor Day, and we looked at the Cry of Poor Workers, from Isaiah 58 – 59, and I challenged us to not use Uber and Lyft, and to reduce our interactions with Amazon.com. In week two, we looked at the Cry of the Sick, also from Isaiah 58 – 59, because the poor are always more sick than others. I challenged us to cut back on sugar. In week three, we looked at the Cry of our Future Children and Grandchildren. We asked, "What can we do to leave the planet more like the garden that God intended?" And we looked at God's words in Isaiah to see how God cared for creation. My challenge there was to reduce our eating of cow products like beef and milk. We noticed that the prophet Isaiah did two things: He rebuked the people of his day, and looked ahead to the Redeemer. When the Redeemer comes, and we believe Jesus was that redeemer, the Redeemer would renew humans and renew the garden of Eden in this world.

In week four, we looked at how Jesus makes us rich: rich in the life of God, rich in sharing life with others, and rich in sharing the creation.

### **Context**

I'm going to look at a New Testament passage now: 2 Corinthians 8. This letter is written by the apostle Paul, one of the earliest of Jewish Christian leaders, to the Christian community at Corinth. In this section, Paul is saying to the Corinthians that he's grateful for their financial generosity. They had pledged to contribute to a famine relief fund for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea. Paul was saying, "Now is a good time to give. Can you give what you pledged?" And as he reminds them, he encourages them by pointing to Jesus.

### **The Mission of the Church**

So I'm going to look at verses 12 – 15:

12 For if the willingness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For this is not for the relief of others and for your hardship, but by way of equality— 14 at this present time your abundance will serve as assistance for their need, so that their abundance also may serve as assistance for your need, so that there may be equality; 15 as it is written: "The one who had gathered much did not have too much, and the one who had gathered little did not have too little."

The mission of the church globally is to journey together through God's creation. We see this here in two ways. First, Paul says the church moves towards equality in the church. And this is not just equality of opportunity as

American freedom-lovers like to think. This is equality of outcomes. Paul was speaking of food, where some have abundance on the one hand, and some have need on the other. The church is called into economic assistance within itself. The church inherits all these challenges from being outside the garden and among fallen human beings and being fallen ourselves. But the church is the community of Jesus' people where Jesus' love for every member is manifested. And therefore, the church moves towards economic equality. Despite the challenges we inherit from the world, the church moves towards a prayerful and thoughtful balancing and equalizing of food and the other things we need as human beings.

Secondly, the church shares one story. As much as each church is different and has its own unique story, each church is united with all the other churches and shares one story. We see the shared story in Paul's quote of Exodus 16:18. "The one who had gathered much did not have too much, and the one who had gathered little did not have too little." That quote comes from the story of God providing manna to Israel while Israel was in the wilderness. Jesus later called the manna "bread from heaven" (John 6:31). Jesus delivered us from bondage to sin, like God delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt. Jesus is taking us to a garden land, like God took Israel to a garden land. We are in the "wilderness" period, the in-between, like Israel was in the wilderness period, the in-between. The big difference, though, is that this same planet is going to be the new garden land, when Jesus comes again. And along with that, the way Jesus leads us through the wilderness time period is not as a shining pillar of fire outside us. The shining pillar of fire was in Jesus and is now in us by the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> But we struggle to trust God together -- all together -- as the body of Christ.

Illus: Here's an example of a church that is connecting with other churches. In September, we got a letter addressed to: "Dear Pastor Valerie Copeland, Hello! You may not know of us, but we are reaching out in friendship as brothers and sisters in Christ in the Boston area, especially those in churches and communities hard-hit by the pandemic. As a first step, we decided to fundraise within our church so that we could offer financial resources to aid other churches in their ministry. One of our members recommended your church because of your faithfulness in ministering to your community during the pandemic. [In addition,] Elder Mako spoke at one of our fellowship retreats several years ago. Our church has also served with Elder Paul Malkemes at Boston Project Ministries in the past. We are enclosing a church-to-church gift, in the hope of encouraging and supporting your church's ministry. Please use it wherever it's most needed... We pray for God's peace through these times and hope to connect in the future. Blessings, Chinese Bible Church of Greater Boston." Which is in Lexington. They attached a check for \$1,200.

All the people who really follow Jesus are really one people. Yes, we are all very different in many ways. But we share this in common: We share the same story. And we move towards equality.

Let me zoom out into the big picture again and say that this is why it is so wrong to celebrate Christopher Columbus. Next week, on the calendar as Monday, October 11th, is technically Christopher Columbus Day. What did Christopher Columbus do? What did colonialism do? The colonizers took wealth from the colonized. It's not about moving towards equality. It's about increasing the inequality of both wealth and power. Columbus and the Spanish conquistadores enslaved the Taino population of Hispaniola. They were human traffickers and sex traffickers. They knowingly decimated the Native population by spreading the smallpox pandemic, which had a fatality rate of 80 - 90% in the Native American population. It led to some Spanish Catholics trying to justify all this by saying that Native Americans weren't really human, so they couldn't really come to Jesus, or be loved as image-bearers of God, or be baptized because Christian tradition held that people who were enslaved should be freed from slavery when they were baptized.

But some knew the truth of Jesus, and spoke it. In December 1511, a Dominican preacher named Fray Antonio de Montesinos preached a sermon against the Spanish colonists. He said this: "Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dealt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before. Why do you keep them so oppressed

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<sup>1</sup> That is why at Pentecost, the fire hovered over the church, over each disciple's head. The fire of God entered into each person by the Spirit. As it was said of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt.3:11; Lk.3:16). Jesus' Spirit leads us now on two levels simultaneously: through our own fallen humanity and through our fallen world. Jesus' Spirit is drawing others into Christ as well.

and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day.”<sup>2</sup>

Illus: Here’s an example of a church community working with its own members. I’ve become friends with some folks at a church in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is in the International District of Albuquerque, which is very diverse. The largest groups there are white Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Vietnamese Americans. The church is about 100 people. One of the things they do is they have a matched savings fund. So if people are members of the church and go through a financial literacy class, the church fund will match them 3 to 1. So if a family can save \$1000, the church will match them with \$3000. Some of those folks, especially immigrants, have been able to buy homes in the neighborhood. That’s incredible, because it’s stabilizing, it’s good for kids going to school consistently, it’s good for the entire neighborhood, but also because in the long run, it tends to empower people to be more generous. What you can do with that extra room. What you can do with that garden, involving your neighbors. What you can do in the long run in terms of not getting into debt and empowering other people to be generous. That’s really important because in that same district is The Downs Racetrack and Casino. Gambling is such a real temptation especially for the poor, and a real drain on wealth. And it sets up the opposite mentality. This church community is applying this principle among its own members, so they can be rich in God’s life, rich in the lives of others, and rich in the goodness of creation. The response of a loving God towards the selfishness of human beings is to make us more loving. It’s to transform us from His enemies to His friends, from His opponents to His family, from those opposed to His radical love to those who say, “I love you, Jesus, and I want to love others in your name, Jesus.”

We, too, must invest in one another financially, yes, and also in acts of service, and in emotional support. Last week I mentioned a bunch of people here who have really been generous. Phone calls of support. Meals of support. Sharing your car. Giving rides. Charging below-market costs for what you do. Charging below-market rent. We are moving in that direction with the cohorts of Towards a Jubilee Economy.

### **Why? The Mission of Jesus**

And why do we do this? Because of Jesus. In v.9, which we read last week, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” Wow! Really?!? Jesus makes us rich in the life of God. Not individualistically rich, but rich in the life of God and rich in shared life with others, and rich in the goodness of the creation. Sharing life with one another is a physical manifestation of what happens in the Trinity all the time. The Father says to the Son, “I love you!” The Son says back to the Father, “I love you! I want to share this Spirit that you shared with me back with you.” So much so that in God the persons are always other-centered, always self-giving.

Now we are embodied. So the way that we do that has to be through words, through material things, through time, through healthy touch, all kinds of gestures of love, of self-giving and other-centeredness. This is how Jesus makes us rich. We are rich. We have one another. And yes, sometimes we can feel like a challenge. We talked about that last week. We talked about how we can use money language, like, “What am I getting out of this relationship?” Sometimes we use money language to describe emotional transactions. The challenge for us is how to remember that Jesus makes us rich, making you rich, because he wants to help other people be generous as well, with themselves. There’s an always other-centered thing.

Can we do that? Can we do that this week? Connect with someone. You might feel like, “I don’t get a lot out of this.” But remember, Jesus has already given you what you need. We need to live in the reality that he’s making us all rich. There is something in every interaction that we stand to gain, that we stand to become more generous in. So, if we don’t, we will have wasted an opportunity. I know this is a harder motivation to hear, but I think it’s present in this passage.

Paul quotes Exodus 16:16 – 21. When Paul quotes a passage, it’s like a hyperlink. So let’s double-click on that, shall we?

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<sup>2</sup> *Witness: Writing of Bartolome de Las Casas*. Edited and translated by George Sanderlin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p.66 – 67.

16 This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Everyone gather as much as he will eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of people each of you has in his tent.'" 17 The sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. 18 When they measured it by the omer, the one who had gathered much did not have too much, and the one who had gathered little did not have too little; everyone gathered as much as he would eat. 19 Moses said to them, "No one is to leave any of it until morning." 20 But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and stank; and Moses was angry with them. 21 They gathered it morning by morning, everyone as much as he would eat; but when the sun became hot, it would melt.

If you don't use what you have to be generous, that opportunity that you had is gone. Now that is challenging. Did Paul intend for us to hear that particular element of the story? I think so. He does that all the time. This is how his sense of humor works. "Oh, cool principle. [double click] Wait a minute?!? Are you implying..." Yes, the material world exists so that we could demonstrate the generosity of Jesus, the love of Jesus. Everything that you have hoarded for yourself WILL ROT. The only way to keep anything is to give it to Jesus and to others. Those actions born out of prayer and faithfulness will somehow be remembered by Jesus in the garden that is to come. Selfishness will not exist there, cannot exist there. And that is why selfishness stinks. It stinks to high heaven. That is why we do things like empower more generosity, empower economic health. Not because it's a health and wealth thing. But because Jesus is other-centered, in his very being.