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**God's Bottom Line**

Ezekiel 34:16

One of the surprising social developments of the past few months is the emergence of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement. Since September it has spread from Lower Manhattan to 900 cities and four continents. There are reasons to be skeptical about a movement with amorphous goals and leaders who are rooted in anarchist theory and strategy. But they are posing questions that cannot easily be brushed aside. Is our country increasingly controlled by the wealthiest 1% who provide most of the money for political campaigns? Are ordinary people being squeezed to the degree that they no longer have a meaningful place at the table?

These are not new questions. They were in circulation long before the "Occupy" movement raised them. In a speech before a gathering of Chicago's business and corporate leaders about ten years ago William McDonough addressed the issue of executive compensation. As the recently retired CEO of one of Chicago's largest banks he could speak with some authority. This is what he said:

In 1980 the average large company chief executive officer made forty times more than the average employee in his or her firm. By 2000 the multiple had risen to at least 400 times. In other words over the course of 20 years ... CEO pay went up by 1,000%.

There is no economic theory, however farfetched, which can justify that increase. It is grotesquely immoral (Quoted by John Buchanan, Christian Century, November 15, 2011, page 3).

Or in the words of the "Occupy" movement these are people who seem to be playing by a different set of rules.

The questions posed by the "Occupy" movement are also addressed in Scripture. In the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel the prophet is speaking to a people who live in exile. The exiles have a clear understanding that no one considers them to be important. Their needs and concerns simply do not matter. They have no place at the table. The leaders of the world keep telling them that the table isn't big enough to accommodate unfortunate losers like them.

But Ezekiel wants his people to know that God's bottom line contradicts this way of organizing the world. The prophet tells them of a God who says "I will seek the lost ... and I will strengthen the weak ... and I will feed them with justice (Ezekiel 34:16)." Ezekiel proclaims that God is at work to challenge the social pyramid by which the world is organized to serve the needs of the wealthy. Ezekiel promises the disenfranchised exiles that God is working to prepare for them a meaningful place at the table.

Challenging the pyramid that serves the wealthy and powerful was an important part of the Scottish Reformation. The wealthiest man in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland was Cardinal David Beaton, the primate of St. Andrews. He was far wealthier than the monarch of Scotland. He controlled the tithes the people were required by law to pay to the church. Instead of providing for the poor or the maintenance of the churches these revenues were largely used to line his own pockets. St. Andrews was also a leading tourist destination as people traveled from great distances to visit its cathedral which

claimed to house the bones of Jesus' disciple Andrew. Beaton profited greatly from these revenues as well. Everyone knew that Beaton played by his own rules.

When a reforming preacher named George Wishart began to draw large crowds, it was no surprise to anyone that Beaton had him arrested and burned at the stake. But then a small group of radicals did something the reformers would never have endorsed. Posing as construction workers they slipped into Beaton's palatial home, the castle of St. Andrews, and murdered him. Then in a truly bizarre twist the radicals chose not to run away but to remain in the castle. Soon they were joined by a large and growing group of Protestant rebels and an "Occupy" movement began. Government forces arrived and tried unsuccessfully to dislodge the occupiers resulting in a long stand off.

This became a tremendous public relations "coup" for the reformers. Here they were occupying the palatial home of the wealthiest man in Scotland and using it as a platform from which to spread their message across Scotland. One of the people who joined them in the castle was a young Catholic priest named John Knox. People like Knox moved easily in and out of the castle to speak to groups gathering in nearby towns. The first Protestant congregation in Scotland was organized by the occupiers in the castle. In that worshiping congregation Knox first received the call to preach. The occupation lasted almost a year. The reformers were finally forced to surrender after the arrival of a French fleet which threatened to bombard the castle into ruins.

The people of Scotland clearly understood the symbolism of the occupation. It was a direct challenge to the pyramid of wealth and power that had long ruled the nation. In the community of occupiers there was no distinction between nobles and commoners. Everyone lived and worshiped together. The barriers between rich and poor were removed. There was a place for everyone at the table. The ruling powers understood how dangerous this was. The first thing the authorities did when the occupiers surrendered was to separate the nobles from the common people. The nobles were placed under house arrest in comfortable accommodations while ordinary people like John Knox were condemned to row the French galleys.

The dismantling of the barriers between rich and poor that took place during the occupation of St. Andrews Castle was an effort to implement Ezekiel's promise of justice. It was a direct challenge to the way the world was organized. The British kings of the next century understood this truth about the Scottish Presbyterians. One historian has described the conflict between these kings and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland in these words:

Presbyterianism challenged the natural pyramid of society. The king sat at the top, and power was supposed to flow down from the monarch via his bishops and clergy to those who were sitting in the pews. Presbyterians challenged that order by giving power to the people at the bottom. Ordinary people appointed their elders and their ministers ... Presbyterian power flowed from the bottom up ... (The Sword and the Cross, British Broadcasting Company).

We find this truth expressed in the vision offered in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. When the sheep are separated from the goats both groups ask the same question. "When was it that we saw you...?" Even the sheep are surprised to discover that they are part of Christ's kingdom. To the best of their knowledge they do not know Christ at all.

The gospel tells us that their acquaintance with Christ comes from the fact that they have not accepted the verdict of the power brokers that the hungry, the naked, and the imprisoned are not important. They are the ones who have not grown comfortable with a world in which the powerless

have no place at the table. And so it is that Jesus says to them "... just as you did it to the least of these you did it to me (Matthew 25:40)." God's bottom line is to make a place at the table for those who need it most.