

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B28  
20 Pentecost (Proper 23B) 8:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 10 October 2021

Job 23:1-9, 16-17  
Psalm 22:1-15  
Hebrews 4:12-16  
Mark 10:17-31

### **Harry Edwards, Communist Christians and the End of Slavery**

*“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10).*

Should Christians be communists? That is, do the New Testament authors expect followers of Jesus to live in communities in which most property is shared? Not to spoil the surprise but I think the answer to this is yes. My sermon today comes in three chapters. The first is on poverty in America. The second is on the way of Jesus concerning wealth. The last section concerns what we might practically do.

1. Harry Edwards was the professor of the first class I attended in college. A famous sociologist who specializes in sports, he had been the architect of the Olympic Project for Human Rights which led to the black power salute protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. He knew personally all the most famous Black activists from the newspapers and he taught us about them with wisdom and passion.

Professor Edwards was probably the best looking professor I’ve ever had. He dressed stylishly. Standing at 6 foot 8 inches tall and 240 pounds he didn’t have an ounce of fat on his frame. They say education is wasted on the youth. I had no idea how fortunate I was to study with him and I am embarrassed that I don’t think to wonder where he came from.<sup>1</sup>

This fall I found out. I read his autobiography *The Struggle that Must Be*. In it he describes just one evening in December 1953 to give readers an impression of the poverty experienced by Black people in East St. Louis. In those days eight children lived in his household. At the time his parents were constantly away working and the children pretty much raised themselves with the oldest, Lois at age 12, frequently missing school to care for her younger siblings.

There wasn’t enough food. For a whole week they might subsist just on cans of corn and beans. The house smelled rancid with pigeons and rats infesting the attic so that bird droppings would wash down through the ceiling boards during rainstorms. The basement was filled with coal ash and roaches; dogs would come in through broken windows to die there. The house could be 20 degrees Fahrenheit on winter nights with icicles inside. Only one burner on the range top worked (barely). They had to go outside to the hydrant for water. The outhouse overflowed and became unusable. They had to relieve themselves in the basement or yard.

And yet because television had not arrived, in those days Edwards could not see what the rest of the world was like. For him those times before the family disintegrated were the good days. Edwards writes, “During that time that seemed so distant and so comparatively happy, I saw my family as existing above the turmoil, the criminality, the filth and the strange deadness – hopelessness – that was pervasive in our neighborhood.

I can still remember thinking, "We're different," that we were somehow better than all that..."<sup>2</sup>

What came next was in many ways worse, as Edwards became increasingly exposed to the racism of American society. After attending segregated black elementary and middle schools he found himself in an integrated high school. Within months as a result of four concrete incidents he drew the natural conclusion that white people had engineered and were maintaining a system that constantly humiliated and demeaned black people. This made it nearly impossible to experience anything like real human dignity.

The first white person he felt at all close to was a basketball coach in college at San Jose. When that man simply couldn't hear Edwards' concern about teammates joining fraternities with racist membership bylaws, he realized that he could never be himself with this coach.

2. In today's Gospel, Jesus is on the way. "The way." That's how early Christians described themselves before the word Christian became popular.<sup>3</sup> So Jesus isn't just on the way to Jerusalem, or to his death on the cross, he's showing us a way of living.

A rich man runs up, kneels before him and asks him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life" (Mk. 10)? Jesus tells him to keep the commandments and emphasizes the ones about how to treat other people (rather than the first ones about honoring God). The man says he has kept all of them. And, "Jesus looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

In that time, as is frequently the case in our own, wealth was regarded as a sign of God's blessing. The people listening felt astonished. If someone blessed as this cannot be saved, "then who can be saved?" Jesus answers, "for God all things are possible."

What does this mean? Some interpret this as the justification for monastic poverty. Others see this as only an instruction for this particular person. Preachers have rationalized it saying that giving up possessions is only for those who have a problem with being too preoccupied by wealth (insinuating that most of us in church can handle it). And then of course, there is the natural conclusion that Jesus might really mean this, for everyone.

I believe this challenging teaching cannot be ignored. But also, there is not simply one correct interpretation. Instead the story helps us to understand a dilemma, a continually recurring conflict of principle in our lives.

Perhaps the easiest part of this is that Jesus simply rejects the premise of the man's question. There is nothing we can do to inherit, earn or deserve eternal life. It is a gift that God gives freely to us whether we have done the right things or not.

At the same time this does not let us off easy. Jesus may be saying the same thing to us as he did to the wealthy man. "You lack only one thing." This could be the lack of trust in God that makes us feel desperately unsafe without our possessions. It could also be

the failure of generosity, that hazard of wealth which cuts genuinely good-hearted people off from really being in community with others and therefore from living a full human life.<sup>4</sup>

To return to my opening assertion, the earliest Christian churches were deeply suspicious of individual wealth. I draw this conclusion on the basis of readings like today's and the Book of Acts when, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything was held in common" (Acts 4). In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew warns against storing up "treasures on earth" (Mt. 6:19-20). Luke says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk. 6:24-25). By the way next time you meet someone who claims to read the Bible literally ask them why they in good conscience feel like they should own anything.

I believe early churches were more like what today we would call communes, living out a radically different vision of caring for each other than the violent Roman world surrounding them.<sup>5</sup> You can see this in second century writers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Didache, even in St. Clement of Alexandria's treatise "How the Rich Man Shall Be Saved."

These ideas were present in the fourth and fifth centuries too in Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria. Even John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, at the heart of the Christian establishment, spoke frequently about the great human estate that belongs to all of us.<sup>6</sup> That idea makes me ashamed that Harry Edwards and millions of others grow up with so little in the midst of such great abundance.

My point is that through the centuries this idea keeps recurring in Christian life (especially in renewal movements), that every person has a claim on the collective resources of all humanity. The church today mostly just tries to support the way things are, these property arrangements that we seem to have inherited.

But the New Testament is not just a history book for us. It is not just about another generation's dreams of living in a world without deprivation or want. Jesus challenges us to not always capitulate. Generosity lies at the heart of spiritual health. We are not living at peace with each other the way that God intends us to.

3. My last chapter is on what we can practically do right now as people not living in the ideal but still inspired by its demands for us. It would be difficult to give up all that you have. It would be less difficult to tithe, to simply give ten percent of your income each year to charity. But it would be even easier to join with this Cathedral in helping to correct an obvious and inexcusable injustice in our society.

Capitalism, or the market, is not merely an abstract system of rules governing human relationships. Money does not just magically flow to where it will be most productive. Property and race are connected in our society where human beings were owned by other people for hundreds of years (and constituted the vastest forms of amassed wealth).

The Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution abolishes slavery. However it left a dangerous loophole that has caused terrible suffering for generations, especially for

people of color. It says, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States...”<sup>7</sup> Forcing prisoners to work as slaves corrupts our justice and prison system. But most of all it continues the same practices of cruelty, intimidation, and humiliation that can be even more destructive of human dignity than poverty.

Over the coming months you will learn more about what you can do to help Grace Cathedral in the important work of ending slavery for prisoners in the United States.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? What is the one thing we lack? This week I saw my strong, confident and wise college professor as his eleven year old self, barely surviving the poverty and racism common in our country. He went through so much more than I can convey here and yet by the grace of God he survived to help so many others.

There are no easy answers when it comes to property and yet Jesus’ teaching about generosity cannot be ignored. We have come up short and no amount of moral striving can be enough. But we do know that Jesus looks at us and loves us. We take comfort that for God all things are possible. Let’s see what we can do together.

Photographs:

Black Power Salute Mexico City Olympics 1968

Professor Harry Edwards UC Berkeley

John Chrysostom (Grace Cathedral Stained Glass Window)

<sup>1</sup> I did know enough to realize that Professor Edwards was helping friends of mine who were athletes.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Edwards, *The Struggle that Must Be: An Autobiography* (NY: Macmillan, 1980) 23.

<sup>3</sup> Καὶ ἐκπορευόμενοι αὐτοὺς εἰς οἶκον προσδραμῶν εἰς καὶ γονυπέθ/σαβ αὐτοῦ ἐφρωῶτα αὐτοῦ/ν: διδάσκαλε ἀόγαγε, τί ποιήσω ἵνα ζωῶν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω; (Mark 10:17).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Boulton, “Faith and Money: Lectionary Commentary for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost,” *SALT*, 3 October 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/twenty-first-week-after-pentecost-lectionary-commentary>

<sup>5</sup> A wonderful short essay on this topic is David Bentley Hart, “Are Christians Supposed to be Communists?” *The New York Times*, 4 November 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/christianity-communism.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&r=0>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirteenth\\_Amendment\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirteenth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution)