

“The Gilded Age”

Sermon – September 8, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

“To the young American, here or elsewhere, the paths to fortune are innumerable and all open; There is invitation in the air and success in all his wide horizon.”

That is a quote from *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. It is a novel by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner first published in 1873. It satirizes greed and political corruption in post-Civil War America.

In fact, it is from the title of this book that the time from about 1870 to the turn of the 20th century became known as the Gilded Age. It is an apt name because gild means to “to overlay with or as if with a thin covering of gold.”

Thus, the era appears as a “Golden Age” but only on the surface. As historian Nell Irvin Painter says, “‘Gilded’ has the sense of a patina covering something else. It’s the shiny exterior and the rot underneath.”

It is easy to caricature the Gilded Age as an era of corruption, conspicuous consumption, and unfettered capitalism. But in a broader sense, it was modern America's formative period, when an agrarian society of small producers were transformed into an urban society dominated by industrial corporations.

The late 19th century saw the creation of a modern industrial economy. A national transportation and communication network was created, the corporation became the dominant form of business organization, and a managerial revolution transformed business operations.

It was a rising tide that lifted all boats—just that it lifted a few boats much higher than others. Most Americans real wage increase was one of

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the highest percentage-wise in history, but that is only because it was so low to begin with.

It’s difficult to find a precise comparison between the level of inequality in the Gilded Age and that of today, because it hasn’t been tracked consistently and the modern income tax did not exist until the 20th century.

But studies show that the richest people in the U.S. today—like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Bill Gates among others—hold a higher percentage of wealth compared to their peers 125 years ago—like the Rockefellers, Morgans, and Carnegies. This has led some to say we are living in a Second Gilded Age.

In fact, the top 400 people in the U.S. have more wealth than the bottom 50% of Americans combined or about 160 million people, who altogether hold less than 3% of our country’s wealth.

As extreme as that it is, we are arguably still better off. In 1890, 11 million of the nation’s 12 million families or 92% were below the poverty line, as we would estimate it, which, coincidentally, was probably about the same in Jesus’ time.

Today on average about 11% of Americans are below the poverty line—which is still by far the highest among developed nations. And they essentially have zero net worth. For being the richest nation in the world, among our peers we have the highest percentage of poor people.

None of this may be new to you but it is worth repeating, not to bash the rich per se, but to highlight the chasm of disparity and one that has only continuously grown in the 21st century. As Christians we have a

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moral obligation not only to help the poor but to address the systemic and structural issues that hinder people from improving their lot in life. And today’s scripture lessons underscore that.

This week’s texts from Proverbs 22 are pulled from a collection that reflects on how living well affects a person’s economic condition and how those who “have” must attend to how they respond to those who “have not.”

Note these words are addressed not to the poor, but the rich. The rich are to feel empathy—not antipathy—for the poor. In fact, they have an obligation out of their abundance to share with the poor.

Further, the rich should have honor and not getting rich at the expense of the poor. As verse 1 says, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” In other words, it is better to be a person of integrity even at the cost of less wealth.

And the next verse explains why, “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” We are all children of God. No one is better than another simply because they are better off than another.

Verses 8 and 9 then say, “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”

So, in fact, if your actions hurt others, God will not be happy. Significantly, verse 9 does not say one has to be wealthy to be generous. The generous soul “shares” rather than “gives” suggests that the generous person may not be rich themselves.

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Finally, we have verses 22-23, “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

It is sad that the redactor felt obligated to say “Don’t rob the poor”. Even sadder that many people are doing just that today even with pride calling the poor “suckers.”

The Epistle of James is much harsher and more pointed. You heard from chapter 2 how James chastises those who favor the well-to-do and ignore or shove aside the less fortunate. It is an easy trap for any of us to fall into. We will pay money, for example, to hear a wealthy person tell us the keys to success but not to a single mom to tell us how she is somehow managing to raise three children while working at a diner and having no health insurance.

James emphasizes that the “love” in “love your neighbor” is an action verb. You have to do tangible, real things to help others. That is part of living out your faith. Otherwise, your faith is literally just lip service. Further, that love includes seeking justice, not judgment. As verse 13 says, “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

And that mercy means helping to feed and clothe those who are hungry and naked, not just giving them your “thoughts and prayers.”

Some of the wealthy in the Gilded Age did believe they should share their good fortune.

Andrew Carnegie, the Gilded Age steel baron, argued in his widely read 1889 essay, “The Gospel of Wealth,” that captains of industry such as he must dispense with their excessive fortunes for public benefit

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within their lifetimes, saying, “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced.” Carnegie helped to establish numerous colleges, schools, nonprofit organizations associations, and libraries. In addition, he paid for thousands of church organs in the United States and around the world.

In that same vein in 2010 Warren Buffett and Bill Gates launched the “Giving Pledge”, whose 241 megawealthy signatories have promised to dedicate a majority of their fortunes toward charitable pursuits. And while we may be skeptical or even cynical about such actions, they are at least in the vein of Psalm 22 of sharing their wealth.

And while I don’t believe any of us are in the top 1% with them or perhaps even the top 10%, many if not most of us are still probably reasonably comfortable economically. And you are a generous congregation with your money as well as time and talents.

The task before us, though, is to advocate for and work towards making today’s Gilded Age more of a Golden Age, where the disparity between those at the bottom and those at the top is decreased as much as by eliminating the barriers to advancement as by the wealthy sharing their wealth: jobs with fair wages; food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care that are affordable and accessible.

The answers are not simple or easy. But it starts with a belief that we all have this in common: the Lord is maker of us all. And that to love your neighbor means that mercy triumphs over judgment.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer,
Amen.

Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.