

# **Inequality & the Church**

## **Zechariah 7:8-14**

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4 October 2015

One April morning in 2002 I was driving south along rural state highways in eastern Arkansas, in the region called The Delta, on my way to the town of Helena. I was listening to Mary J. Blige's album *No More Drama* and watching the cotton fields pass by. I was heading to Helena in order to plan my youth group's upcoming mission trip to the town. The church I was serving, Rolling Hills Baptist in Fayetteville, Arkansas, had decided to send our youth to Helena, Arkansas as part of new work being done there by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Nationally the CBF had adopted the twenty poorest counties in the country in order to focus our domestic missions efforts. Two of the counties were in Arkansas.

I arrived in Helena a couple of hours before my scheduled meeting with our local partners, so I decided to drive around and take a look at the town. There were beautiful, grand, old homes, but there were also areas of extreme poverty. One thing I quickly noticed were the campaign posters. Despite the fact that Helena is an African-American majority city, the faces on the posters of the candidates running for sheriff and other offices were white.

I parked on the old main street where blocks and blocks of buildings lay empty. Sixty years ago this town had a population of 40,000; in 2002 it was less than 10,000. I went into a little café run by an African-American woman and had the best grits and some of the best coffee I've ever had. While sitting there, I started talking with the other customers and got into a deep conversation with a man who ran one of the organizations in town that helped teenagers. He moved over to my table and began to share his story with me.

He had grown up in Helena and gone away to college, one of the benefits of integration. But he hadn't come back home after college; he had stayed away for decades, until he realized that he needed to go home and help the young people there. He told me that integration, though clearly a good thing, had had negative effects on the town. The town was drained of capital when many of the white people fled to the suburbs of Little Rock, Memphis, and Jackson. He said that many of the talented and intelligent members of the African-American community were finally able to go to college and get good jobs in other parts of the country, leading to a brain drain. The most devastating impact, however, had been the death of black businesses. Once all of the town's stores were integrated and open to everyone, the African-American business district had slowly died, ridding the city of its African-American professional class. This was an eye-opening conversation for me, I'd never had any conversation like it before.

The local organizers I met with after this eye-opening conversation were the Rev. Dr. Mary Olson and Ms. Naomi Cottoms. Dr. Olson is a white woman and a Methodist minister. Ms. Cottoms is African-American. Together they had moved to Helena to try to help with issues of poverty, housing, health care, and democracy.

As I entered their offices, I was nervous because I'd never done anything like this before. They later told me that they were not sure what to make of me. Here I was, a young, white guy from the affluent part of the state, and a Baptist at that. Maybe I was going to just bring my youth, have some fun, but not really help.

But, something just clicked between us. Have you ever met people like that, strangers whom you suddenly realize you can connect with deeply? It was like that for me and Dr. Olson and Ms. Cottoms. Over the course of a few hours, we talked logistics and plans, and then drove around to look at the town and the worksites. I even met some of the elderly people whose homes we would be working on.

In 2002 in the United States here I was being driven around a city with neighborhoods that did not have running water, where the residents had to go to a central spigot and get water and carry the water back to their homes. In this town there were human beings living in shelters where I wouldn't house animals.

Though I had known that extreme poverty existed in this country, I didn't really know it before that day. Though I intellectually knew that racism still deeply affected American society, before that day I didn't really know it. I can honestly say that my day in Helena, Arkansas that April in 2002 forever changed me. My eyes were opened, and I awoke from a slumber. My ministry changed because I now realized that I had to work actively in the communities in which I lived to improve life. That day I developed an active passion for issues of race, poverty, and justice.

In his encyclical letter "Praise Be," Pope Francis is concerned not only with climate change and other environmental issues. He is concerned with our current "throwaway culture," as he calls it, and the effect that culture has not only upon the Earth but upon human society. We are experiencing a breakdown of society and a decline in the quality of human life, he writes. And his concerns are broad. Cities around the globe are experiencing unruly and ugly growth making them unhealthy places to live. The global drug trade and its violence. An overload of trivial information through new media, leading to a lack of wisdom and contemplation. Hunger and the lack of clean water. National debt and income equality. The exploitation of natural resources, particularly in developing countries. A deified market and reliance on technological fixes. The mistreatment of indigenous peoples. Mercury pollution resulting from gold mining. Unsustainable agricultural practices. All of these and more issues are mentioned in the broad scope of Francis' pastoral letter. His breadth of vision is inspiring and a bold reminder that much of what troubles humanity is interconnected. He wrote, "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference."

We must begin to change our culture by first seeing what's wrong, particularly what we've done wrong. Francis wrote, "The way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices [is by] trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen."

Once we see what's wrong and confess our role, then we can begin to recognize the way forward. What Francis urges is not a big technological fix, what he recommends are "gestures of generosity, solidarity and care . . . since we were made for love."

The prophet Zechariah recommends rendering true judgments, showing kindness and mercy, not oppressing, and not devising evil against one another. Both messages are hopeful. Looking at the news and the problems of the world—the refugee crisis, bombing a hospital, three school shootings in one day—we can easily be overwhelmed. We can wonder if there are any solutions and what possibly we can do. Again and again the wise ones remind us that the world is improved by small acts of kindness. Yes, we should do what we can to change systems and laws and improve the world, but remember all of that also relies on us each and every day treating the people around us with care and hospitality.

When my youth group visited Helena, Arkansas in the summer of 2002 we painted houses, rebuilt front steps, and constructed a wheel chair ramp for one mother we had watched carry her disabled son up and down her back steps. In the grand scheme of things, these were small acts.

The next year, when I returned, I learned that a Habitat for Humanity chapter had been formed by one of the local men who worked with our team and realized that the town didn't need people on mission trips, that they could organize and do the work themselves. And now I'm excited whenever I read the newsletter of Rolling Hills Baptist Church and see that thirteen years later that church continues its ministry in the Arkansas Delta, having now forged very long-lasting relationships.

Let us open our eyes in order to see what is occurring around us. Confess our sins. And then begin the work of repentance and healing through our small acts of kindness and care.