



UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

LESSON FOUR: "WE ALL HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA."

STORY FOR THE DAY

Long-time friends Linda and Joan are sitting in a local coffee shop catching up on what has been happening recently in their lives. They are both in their mid-30s and married with children. Linda is telling Joan about a family her church has "adopted."

"The mother is a stay-at-home mom with three children and the father has been looking for a job for almost the entire year since they moved into the town," Linda says.

"Why doesn't the mother work?" Joan asks.

Linda replies, "Because one of the children has a mental handicap and needs constant attention."

Linda tells Joan how the church has helped the family pay rent, utility and medical bills and buy prescriptions. Church members also take the family to the grocery store because they have no transportation.

But finally Linda confides, "I just don't understand why the father can't get a job. Maybe he doesn't like hard work. This is America, after all. Everyone in America has the same opportunity, so why isn't he working?"

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

For generations, America has been known as the "promised land," the place where a poor immigrant who worked hard and had a little luck could prosper. It also has been known as the "land of opportunity" where there was no rigid class system and upward mobility was almost guaranteed for each successive generation. Almost since its founding, America has been on the forefront of modernization, production and education.

For many people in America today, however, this ideal of our nation no longer exists. For them, the American Dream is just that – a dream. Hard work no longer guarantees success and prosperity. Jobs are scarce and education is often sub-par. As consumer prices in several markets continue to climb, there is less and less expectation and much less assurance of upward mobility.

Today's lesson looks at the American Dream and societal factors in recent decades that have tarnished it.

» MAKING IT REAL

We do not get where we are in life alone. There are many contributing factors that help us along the way.

Take out a sheet of paper and tear it into 10-15 pieces. On separate pieces of paper, one piece per question, write answers to:

- The name/s (up to three) of persons who have helped you at some time in your life either pursue a goal, get an education, or helped you financially
- The highest level of education you have completed, and the name of the school
- Your race
- Your gender
- If you own a vehicle
- Your relationship status (married, single, widowed, etc.)
- Number of children you have
- Your health status (good, fair, poor).

Place all the pieces of paper, face up, on your table keeping your papers directly in front of you. The teacher takes one or two pieces of paper from each person and gives them to someone else.

Ask members to imagine and share at their table what their life might be like considering these changed circumstances. Mix up the papers several times and allow for discussion after each turn.

Today we will be discussing some of these factors and what happens to people when situations we often take for granted are not present.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE AMERICAN DREAM?

For most of us, the American Dream is that anyone, regardless of class or economic status, can achieve a prosperous life. If you work hard and make good decisions you can be anything and do anything. The flip side is that if you are not prosperous, it's because of a personal ethical or moral defect, i.e., it's your own fault. Such a judgment can define a person throughout his or her life.

As we experienced in the exercise we just completed, several factors help us arrive at our station in life. The reality today, however, is that many people are not able to claim the American Dream because they are unable to access the same opportunities as those in the middle and upper classes. America no longer provides a level playing field for all its citizens.

There are three factors that have changed in American society in the last two decades that contribute to this inequality:

- A disparity in the quality of education and skill development between low-income and middle- and upper-income students.
- Globalization that has resulted in computers and other robotics displacing many manufacturing jobs that once were available for nonskilled laborers. The new frontier is no longer manufacturing but technology, which requires a higher level of skill and education.
- Lingering racism that denies many people equal access to education, skill development and employment opportunities.

Let us consider each of these three factors in more detail.

Education/Skill Development

Public school districts are funded by city or county taxes. For school districts located in low-income communities, there is less revenue for schools. The result can be cuts in arts, humanities and athletic programs and the inability to purchase current textbooks, computer and technological equipment, and other supplies needed for a quality education.

Nearly 50 percent of minority students do not graduate from high school within four years.

Without this bedrock of a solid education, students are less prepared to face the academic rigors of college. Access to scholarships diminishes because the students cannot compete academically for them. Educational loans become the only option, leaving many new graduates overwhelmed with student loans that will take them decades to pay off. Without a quality education, the odds increase that individuals will be caught in a cycle of low-income employment, increasing debt and despair.

Globalization in the Post-Industrial World

The emergence of new technologies and the global market create many challenges for people seeking employment. Jobs that Americans once could depend upon have been exported overseas or replaced by machines to provide companies with low-wage labor and lower retail prices at home. Americans earning a low wage are losing ground and losing jobs. The United States has shifted from a mass-production system of manufacturing to a system centered on finance, services and technology. China, India, and countries in the former Soviet Union are aggressively competing in the technological arena. America no longer has the niche in the technological world or the technological education and production capability that she once had.

This shift has decimated the manufacturing industry in America, leaving many of the nation's major urban areas with lower-skilled, unemployed workers seeking jobs in retail and service industries. Whereas the

manufacturing jobs were generally unionized and assured employees higher wages and health care benefits, the retail and service industries offer neither.

For the lower-skilled worker in America, it is a double whammy – at home and abroad.

Race and Ethnicity

Forty years after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, racism still keeps people of color from equal education and employment opportunities.

What we begin to see is the relentless spinning of a vicious cycle. Education and skills training for those who live in poorer districts lag behind that provided for children who live in wealthier districts. Consequently, opportunity to access higher education diminishes. Urban districts begin to lose their residential and retail centers because of “white flight” – one of the more blatant expressions of racism in recent decades. As a result, people who are less educated are increasingly isolated from diverse communities and obtainable employment in their neighborhoods. Less education, less earning ability, less access to employment: This cycle of poverty lessens all of us and damages our founding intention of being a nation that offers liberty and justice to all.

Inequality in America and around the world can be changed, but it takes individuals coming together to state that it is unacceptable. What better group than the church to step forward in this cause? Believing as we do both as Christians and as Americans that we are all created in God’s image and that we are “one nation under God,” we must be a voice for people whose voices are never heard. If we are serious about following Christ’s example, we are called to be countercultural and to love radically.

Read the following two statements and discuss:

To stand up in an unjust society and call for justice means that I am willing to subject myself to a lot of pressure. When a person stands up on the side of the oppressed and justice, he decides to trade comfort for concern, apathy for action, violence for nonviolence, hate for love.

Source: John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*

Relationships are not built on the transfer of money and resources, but rather on an exchange of hopes, fears, and life stories. Christian spirituality means eating together, sharing together, drinking together, talking with each other, receiving each other, experiencing God’s presence through each other, and in doing so, proclaiming the gospel as God’s alternative vision for everyone...especially those who are poor, outcast, and battered.

Source: Elizabeth Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*

CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What is your definition of equality? Equal opportunity? Where does this definition come from?
2. What would it look like in our country for everyone to have the same opportunities – an equal playing field? Is this possible? What would have to change?
3. Are there ways that we contribute to inequality? What is your version of the American Dream? What experiences have contributed to this?



4. Does the idea of the “American Dream” effect the way that the church helps people who are poor? If so how?

CALL TO BE ATTENTIVE

In the benediction following, noted African American poet Langston Hughes describes what his dream for the world would be. Spend some time now or this week writing your own version of the American Dream.

I Dream

I dream

A world where man

No other man will scorn,

Where love will bless the earth

And peace its paths adorn.

I dream of a world where all

Will know sweet freedom’s way,

Where greed no longer saps the soul

Nor avarice blights our day.

A world I dream where black or white,

Whatever race you be,

Will share the bounties of the earth

And every man is free,

Where wretchedness will hang its head

And joy, like pearl,

Attends to the needs of all mankind —

Of such I dream, my world!

— Langston Hughes



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

My American Dream is ...

What do you have to achieve to make you feel that you have “made it”? What will it take for your American dream to come true? What stands in your way?