

How to Use Your Wealth: Protecting Status or Aiding Common Good?

The co-teacher of our weekly Sunday School class grew up Jewish.

As such, he is our resident resource person for questions about the religious conceptual framework within which both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures came to be.

He observed in a recent discussion that the “calling” of the Jews to be a “chosen people” had much less to do with a special status than it did with a responsibility to be an agent of “blessing” to all peoples (as is explicitly clear in Genesis 12:1-3).

It has been hard for me not to connect that thought with some of the current conversation about privilege and entitlement, as well as proposals for a revision of our tax policies in response to the economic challenges of our society.

Privilege is a broader question than economics, of course. It can be a manifestation of social frameworks, educational opportunity and the overall valuing that a society places on certain professions, forms of celebrity and history-sanctioned gender and racial roles.

We are learning in current conversations about the ease with which privilege can exert its influence, and the ease with which those with certain kinds of privilege can be quite unaware of it.

As a white, straight, male Protestant in the United States, who has benefited from the full range of those privileges, I can testify to both of those insights.

Many forms of privilege are “givens” for which there is little choice, and moral and ethical valuations of them in themselves do little to address the issues they

raise.

What we can notice, however, is that privilege can easily lead to a sense of entitlement, and a lack of that privilege can lead to a sense of victimhood by and on behalf of those without it.

This dynamic becomes clear in the current discussions of ways to respond to the income/wealth inequality that characterizes our economic system.

Proposals for a “wealth tax” to require the top 1 percent of citizens to contribute more to the revenue stream to support public services are met by immediate cries of foul from some of the public voices in that group.

Not being knowledgeable about the minute details of tax policy, I do not know the pros and cons of such proposals, but I do find it interesting that some people with so much wealth balk at the suggestion that they contribute more of it for the common good.

It does not appear that such an increase would result in a significant adjustment in lifestyle or operation of any enterprise whose workers produced the wealth.

Here is the ethical issue that I find in need of clarification and refinement: Because wealth is a given in society, how should it be used?

It does little good to castigate wealth as such, for it appears that some form of it will always be with us.

Pitting the wealthy against the non-wealthy does not encourage the kind of community a healthy society must have to thrive.

The choice (and the ethical element of the picture) is not whether to be wealthy, but how one’s wealth is used.

Is it protected for greater accumulation and use for benefits that are limited to one’s own purposes and pleasures, or is it leveraged in the service of things that

benefit a broader portion of the human family and its needs?

Philanthropists in all generations seem to work at the latter of these options. They do not reduce themselves to marginal economic status in doing so, but at least they seem to embrace a sense of responsibility to share at least some of their fortunes.

Which leads me to wonder why there should be such an outcry in response to a suggestion for a systematic way of collecting a portion of what is clearly surplus wealth to address some of the urgent needs of our common life.

We are reminded on many fronts that life and its blessings are gifts for which we are called to be stewards, and we do that in large and small ways, depending on the measure of those gifts we have.

Is it too far-fetched to see a connection between the covenant faith we spiritual children of Abraham are invited to embrace, not as a privilege to be enjoyed and protected, but as a means of being agents of the creative and redemptive presence of the God who invited us to join it?

And to bring it slightly closer home in our biblical pilgrimage, it is hard to miss Paul's admonition: "Have this mind among you, that you also have in Christ Jesus, who did not count his God-ness something to hold for himself, but emptied himself as a servant" (Philippians 2:5-7).

I suspect we will be treated to much discussion of this issue in the coming weeks and months.

Let us hope that we will be able to listen with discernment and respond with a faithful stewardship of our wealth, whatever its level.