

This past January marked the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of a War On Poverty. I'm sure most of us agree on some level that the results of the "war-effort" in the years since have been a mixed bag. Combating poverty in this country has proven especially difficult and complex, and we've had serious disagreements over how best—and how much—to engage the issue.

Indeed, in terms of engaging the issue, it's even difficult to say where we should begin—even when talking in the broadest terms. Surely, some will say we need better policies to assist the poor, while others may contend that we need more, and more effective, charitable giving. I agree that there is a need to do much more on both fronts, but I actually don't think that either of these are the starting points of our engagement.

I don't, however, mean to understate the vital importance of either improving public policies or charitable giving, here. Our public policies are, after all, also expressions of our shared, public morality. And believe me, I could go on and on about how we should increase food stamp assistance. Or how we need better housing options for the nearly 2000 families here in Massachusetts

living in motels.¹ Or how economic justice and the realities of the labor market demand that we not only increase the minimum wage, but ensure a living wage for all workers, as well. These things are all desperately needed, and we need good people doing all that they can to advocate for them. And, of course, on many days we need only to look around right under this very floor for a few minutes to start to realize how much low income folks absolutely rely on charitable giving. We can always do more, and in recent years there's been a sharper focus in some philanthropic circles about how to make the most good of the donated dollar--giving that maximizes efficiency and impact.² Again, these are critical issues, but they're not what I actually want to discuss today.

Instead, I'd like to talk about the deeper issue that underlies these: our attitudes toward the poor. To properly combat poverty--and to have more effective policy and charitable giving--we all must first and foremost replace indifference, antipathy and contempt with sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

Lately, I've been reading a book titled, The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap by Matt Taibbi, the

¹ Source: Homes For Families, Inc. homesforfamilies.org

² See, for example, the work by GiveWell at givewell.org

preeminent muckraker of the Great Recession Era. At the start of the book, Taibbi claims that “[America] has a profound hatred of the weak and the poor,”³ a statement that grabbed some media attention and my own. When asked about it in a recent interview with The Huffington Post, Taibbi explained, "Any American understands that there's this tremendous pressure to succeed, and we think about people, for instance, who are on the welfare system and we think of them without compassion. We think of them as unsympathetic characters because they're somehow taking from us and, meanwhile, there's this incredible adulation and worship for people who make money."⁴ I like Taibbi a lot. I share his unhealthy love of profanity and his distrust of powerful institutions. And I'm enjoying the book. But I think he overstates the case, here.

In fact, recent polling suggests something quite to the contrary--an American public that's largely sympathetic to the plight of the poor. In one poll, 50 percent of Americans said that circumstances beyond a person's control are typically to blame for being poor, while only 35 percent said it was due to a lack of effort.

⁵ In another, 64 percent agreed poverty is due to structural issues

³ p. xx. Spiegel and Grau. 2014.

⁴ Source URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/16/matt-taibbi-the-divide_n_5159626.html. 4/16/2014.

⁵ Source URL: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/01/23/pew-poll-obama-wealth-gap-sotu/4777385/>. USA Today. 1/23/2014.

of our economy, that “[m]ost people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don’t pay enough, they lack good health care and education, and things cost too much for them to save and get ahead.”⁶ The same poll study suggests that this knowledge comes from direct experience; 54 percent say that someone in their immediate or extended families is poor.⁷

But are we really America, The Remarkable People of Understanding, as these polls suggest? Let me answer this question as plainly and honestly as I can: No, we are not. It’s one thing to give considered responses to a pollster’s questions; it’s quite another to be compassionate in our everyday lives. Even as Taibbi overstates his case, he’s getting at something, isn’t he? We see and hear evidence of classist resentment all around us. We all see plenty of it in some of the divisive messaging of agenda-driven news outlets. Some of us see it in the ignorant grumblings of our friends on Twitter and Facebook. (And by the way, the next time that ignorant friend shares the patented, “Poor people should get a job”-line in his Facebook status, you could always inform your friend that most able-bodied poor folks do work. And as for the minority who don’t, there was as of recently only

⁶ Source URL: <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/WOP-PollReport2.pdf>, p. 6

⁷ *ibid*, p. 2

one job opening for every three who are unemployed,⁸ and that most of those job openings pay poverty or near-poverty wages, anyway!)⁹ We sometimes see it crop up in random, wholly unsolicited conversations with complete strangers. (Don't you love getting roped into those? Aren't those fun?) And we even sometimes see it in what we, ourselves, say and do. It's always there--ingrained in the American Psyche, poisoning our collective spirit.

Furthermore, I think classism represents the final, difficult frontier along the human voyage to that state of grace that's beyond prejudice. I don't mean to be dismissive of those who have been, and who are still, victimized by other forms of discrimination--including many of our friends here in this congregation. We still yet have so much further to go to traverse the straits of homophobia, racism, and other forms of prejudice. But I do think our classist prejudices will be the last that we leave behind us.

⁸ Source URL:

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/jan/07/gene-sperling/there-are-3-unemployed-people-every-job-opening-ob/>. Published January, 2014.

⁹ Source URL:

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/28/business/economy/recovery-has-created-far-more-low-wage-jobs-than-better-paid-ones.html?_r=0. New York Times. Published 4/27/2014.

But these attitudes toward the poor are slowly shifting toward better understanding, in part because of an increasing awareness of the pervasiveness of poverty. It is not merely the problem of some other, desperate people in a far-away land. It's in plain sight and all around us. We frequently describe the poor as being on the fringes or margins of society, but they're often next-door neighbors to the wealthiest folks in town. Most of us at some point will encounter the barriers that poverty creates, or else feel it nipping at our heels, as we do what we can just to keep up with the high costs of living, often paycheck to paycheck. In fact, recent research tells that 54 percent of us will spend a year or more in poverty or near a level of poverty.¹⁰ It is a mainstream existence in this country, one into which many of us are involuntarily born or thrust, and one to which we all share a connection. Poverty doesn't imply the existence of a character flaw or a lack of motivation; it merely implies a lack of money.

But poverty is really a catch-all term, and it of course varies greatly in degree, and its effects are felt in different ways by different people. The factory worker, with tired eyes and fingers worn to the bone, who struggles to keep up with the high costs of

¹⁰ Source URL: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/02/poverty-in-america-is-mainstream/>. New York Times. Published 11/2/2013.

living. The recent college graduate, living in a tiny studio and saddled with enormous debt, unable to get a decent job and unsure where his life is going. The single mother who works multiple part time jobs during the day and does what she can to comfort her crying, hungry child at night. The panhandler along the side of the road who carries in his hands the thing that's both his sole possession and sole bit of hopefulness--a sign that asks for help. All of these people are worthy of our sympathy.

This even holds true for the most challenging cases of poverty, including those relatively few people who we commonly say, "refuse to help themselves." My wife works in a hospital emergency room, and she often shares some real horror stories of these challenging cases she encounters. These include indigent folks with substance abuse issues who require care day after day. But rather than show gratitude, some of them act rudely, nastily, or even sometimes violently toward their caregivers. Hard as it may be to feel sympathy for such people, we should still try. After all, such people aren't born that way. There's always a backstory. And that story is almost always long, tragic, complex, and tells us that their broken spirits are a product of our broken world. It's up to us to learn that story and help mend our world.

Learning these stories and mending our world starts with the smallest, most commonplace interactions. And we're fortunate to have here among us the ultimate example a person who did this, who engaged and embraced the poor and changed the world in the process. He's right up here [stained glass window of Jesus], looking each of us in the eyes. We have a good idea of what Jesus would do if he encountered panhandlers along the sides of roads of present day America, don't we? The same thing he did when he shared his ministry with the poor along the roads and shores of Galilee 2,000 years ago.

But too often we don't follow his example. For all my progressive idealism, I know that I don't always do so. As I start my commute home from my office near Sullivan Square in Charlestown, I often drive by these folks panhandling. And sometimes I will stop and give them a few dollars, but often I'll drive right by and not even look their way. I'll instead purposely stare straight ahead, with my hands at 10 and two on the steering wheel. I have a built-in excuse, of course; safe driving is important, after all. But that's typically not really the reason why I do this. I'm not quite sure why I don't acknowledge them. I certainly don't feel

contempt for them. But I often feel some uncertainty about what I should do--along with some sadness, and perhaps a little nervousness, too. Though I know, deep down, I can do something to reach out to them. But by not doing so, by not acknowledging them, I effectively express indifference towards them.

I suspect many of us find ourselves in this very situation, during our commutes to and from work or driving elsewhere. What, then, should we do in these cases? Well, what if, instead of treating them with indifference, we treated them as we would treat one of our friends? I mean, what do you do when you see one of your friends along the side of the road? You might stop and give your friend money (especially if your friend holds a sign asking for money). You might ask your friend what's going on and if you can be of help. And depending on the particular circumstance, you might honk and wave. Or you might just say hello.

I have no real interest in telling you what exactly you ought to do in these cases. I think it's great if you can spare some change--and surely, giving money to someone in need wouldn't be the worst thing you could do in the course of a day. But I'm not suggesting that you must do that. Nor am I suggesting that you do

away with common sense or put yourself at risk for the sake of engaging complete strangers. But I am suggesting that you can and should do something to acknowledge their basic humanity. I am suggesting that you and I should never be indifferent.

We must never be indifferent. We must look our poor friends in the eyes and do so with a little more sympathy and compassion. It starts with our attitudes and the smallest, most commonplace interactions. It starts with you. And it starts with me.

Amen.