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TENTACLES OF EMPIRE

You gave me no water for my feet . . . you gave me no kiss . . . you did not anoint my head with oil.

—Luke 7:44–46

In Cuernavaca in the 1960s Ivan Illich had a discussion about institutional evolution with people from around the world. He was very prophetic in saying that you could trace the community benefits of institutions through time. They rise and then flatten out and then they begin to recede and move in the opposite direction for which the institution was created. He called that counter-productivity. In fact, he said, this process was what we were observing at the moment, so that in the end you would have crime-making justice systems. You would have sickness-making medical systems. You would have stupid-making schools. All are a manifestation of how the tentacles of empire reach into every corner of our lives.

THE CORPORATIZATION OF SCHOOLS

Our schools are one place where the strength of the empire is especially clear.

Universities are increasingly marketplace-driven. They are revising their curricula away from the humanities and promoting programs dictated by industry that off-load the cost of education onto the public. They are growing their educational customer base by giving students more flexibility as a recruiting device. University of Kansas used to have seventy-two required courses to graduate. Now they have fifty hours of core curriculum, all designed to be more adaptive to the changing marketplace. They don't want people to have to take courses that aren't immediately useful to them. The humanities now have to justify their contribution to the economy, instead of to the quality of citizenship of the student. All this is the market ideology running higher education for the executive class and workplace training for the employees.

Also, our schools have moved to the frontline of the class warfare being waged. The argument is that in a global market our elite have to be able to compete with Japan and China and Brazil for the best and brightest. For all others, we need cheap labor. This is a disinvestment strategy toward urban and rural un-privileged families and youth. It holds the belief that a small minority of well-educated people can sustain an economy that pays low wages for everybody else. It says that all people do not need to be well educated.

NO VIEW FROM THE TOP

The people who are in charge of the corporations, the market system's institutions, have an interest in staying blind to social and economic deprivation and differentiation. They may know about it and buy tables at fundraisers, but they do not see it. They don't see it because they think they are contributors and cause to the well-being of society. They would say they have, through mass production, brought benefits to people who never had them before. They have a foundation through which they give money back to communities. They transform their companies into green ones. Their buildings are LEED-certified buildings.

The challenge is that these benefits never reach the bottom of the system. The rising tide does not lift all boats. Those at the bottom and at the margin are considered undeserving; they are today's equivalent of scripture's widows, orphans, and immigrants. They are considered undeserving because from a distance they seem "unproductive." This is what the free market consumer ideology system can't tolerate. We blame them for not producing. We say they don't contribute. There is no awareness of how hard it is to have little. This is the unforgivable sin of the market ideology.

The market ideology declares that to be a widow, orphan, or immigrant—or to be unemployed—is a self-inflicted wound. It's your fault. We associate undeserving with the people on the margins. What is changing is that the middle class is slowly joining the widows, orphans, and immigrants.

Charity is the instrument or means to sustain that mentality. Charity does not address the economy. It takes the economy as a given and attends to its casualties. Most of the churches are so proud of their charity that you can't even talk about the economy. After we made a presentation on this line of thinking in one of our churches, someone said, "I saw that and I prayed for you because it looked like you were stepping over the line."

END OF ALIVENESS

One way to think of the market ideology and the empire is that it produces alienation and loss of human vitality. When you have stolen someone's humanity it leaves the person pointless and with a deep sense of entitlement. You have taken aliveness out of life. The system isolation is not only omnipresent but it is aggressive and compelling, attractive, and seductive. It operates as if the dominant culture is all there is. This is a socio-economic and political reality. An alternative path requires a prophecy, an idea, and a plan that has the capacity to resist the compelling force of the culture of isolation in which we find ourselves.

The consumer culture's belief in invincibility and progress makes for a culture that is afraid of death. This fear fuels a system that offers

accumulation, speed, and convenience as a defense against death. The culture flows from the assumption that the accumulation of commodities will make us safe and happy. This thinking touches everything about politics, economics, and distorted religion. There is a tacit collusion among all of these forces that causes our human capacity to shrivel. We abandon our sense of being human together. What makes it so difficult is that you can't just address this issue or that issue because they are all interrelated.

Within this framework, there is no alternative future. The most the market can imagine is grander extensions of the present. No interruption, no miracle, no surprise, no gift. No prophecy. There is, of course, disruption and innovation in every industry, but it all occurs within the market ideology. New technology is disruptive by design, but never questions technology itself. The technology world loves to disrupt markets by increasing speed and convenience. The financial rewards are magical. So now you can order a ride from Uber, but they'd never try to disrupt the market system. The Uber-ride is contained inside that box.

A consumer culture that takes the aliveness out of life also rewards senselessness; there is something senseless about this modern world. In death you can't use your senses. You say people are brain dead because their senses are useless. What we have in our technology and the culture that surrounds us are systematic ways of limiting our senses. It's non-sense we're dealing with. The alternative is to be sensible. In his book on why Jews keep kosher on Sabbath and don't work on Saturday, Michael Fishbane (2008) says they do it to stay mindful. And mindfulness, he says, is essential in a mindless or senseless society.

MOBILITY AND ISOLATION

When standard of living becomes the measure of well-being, mobility becomes the norm. It takes precedence over family and place. It carries a cost. We have seen it in the larger culture where the job moved us around at will. We see it in young people living very fluid lives.

Peter was in a small group one night with a sincere young man who made two statements. The first was that he had grown up alone and

had a lot of time to himself. He was enormously lonely. He is about thirty, and his desire is to find connection with the world, to be more related to others.

The second statement was in response to the question “What would it take to get you out of the house and into the neighborhood?” He said, “Nothing.” He said he moves every year. He lives with a bunch of guys, and every year, when a couple of them take off and get married or move out of town, they reconstitute their living arrangements. “I move every year so I don’t care about my neighborhood,” he said. “There is nothing you can do to make me care about where I live.”

Mobility and isolation work hand in hand in the empire narrative. One manifestation is that when people value mobility they are isolated. Spiritual life and relational life become disassociated from place. To move geographically or up a system ladder separates us from those left behind. To keep moving from one place to another means people have no story in place and no story in work. That makes an isolated population, without a story of connection and aliveness. We come to think that isolation is the norm, and this leaves people ripe for manipulation and seduction. You don’t have a story, but you can buy a new refrigerator. And it is amazing that a refrigerator can be more seductive than a people with a story. Commodity replaces narrative.

In the neighborhood, the people on the margins are the most unsafe. The rest of us have moated ourselves in the suburbs. We have automatic garage doors. Backyards. No front porches. This separates us from the people on the margin. We also warehouse the elderly, who suffer from great loneliness. When Peter takes his granddaughter to a piano lesson in a Senior Center, everything stops when Gracie walks into the room. Not because of who Gracie is, but because they are hungry to be in a broader community so they can experience all the gifts of other friends and neighbors.

UN-PRODUCTIVE WEALTH

Wealth now comes from trading currencies, derivatives, futures, and other forms of making money on money. It is trading that produces nothing of value from three hundred trillion dollars exchanged every

day. This is modern, legitimized usury—far away from the face-to-face personal relationship between the producer and the consumer that is essential to put us into a more authentic relationship with money.

When we buy from a corporate or big box entity, we take money out of local circulation. This turns neighbors into adversaries. The Tenth Commandment is about coveting your neighbor's things: I want more money, a bigger house, and more stuff. The market narrative calls me to want everybody's money, and your wanting money constitutes a threat to me.

The biblical understanding is you cannot accept interest payments from members of the community. You can charge interest to outsiders, but not your neighbors. The thinking is that community is face-to-face, neighborly covenanting. Usury will distort that. You don't have a covenant with strangers, so there is no special bond to distort. The biblical world understood the destructive nature of interest or surplus, not just in the way it put an end to neighborly relations but also how it constructed a distant and instrumental relationship with the stranger.

In a world where the neighborhood is obsolete, the making of money on money becomes legitimate. From whom and what it is based on is irrelevant. That is the way money becomes not a means of transaction, but an economy itself.

VIOLENCE

The current discourse about violence is another expression of the tentacles of empire and the scarcity and class distinctions of the market culture. The conversation on violence becomes one about gun control and retribution. When we talk about gun control, it's always formulated as someone else's issue. In most safety and violence conversations, we are never talking about our own violence. Nor would it occur to the nightly news that the news itself was participating in creating what it reported on.

It may be that the gun violence is the end point of a process by which the adults became isolated from the young people in their communities. As the whole adult world separated from its village-task of raising children, the children made their own village. And we named

them gangs. People who are in a gang call it “my family.” They are young people who have tried in some way to create their own family, because the family that they come from isn’t able to raise them in a competitive world and the village has lost its capacity to raise them, too. And that process has been going on for a better part of a century. Guns in hand have been added to the equation, but guns didn’t cause any of this. Guns are just a new tool introduced to children creating family among peers.

Lord of the Flies was the ultimate expression of the absence of parenting, exposing the violent effects of the lack or mistrust of authority (Golding, 1959). This particular issue of violence has to do with the failure of the villages to raise a child. And the alternative is not to focus on violence; the focus is how to create in our neighborhood the villages that can raise children.

ILLUSION OF REFORM

Talk of reform is always on the table. The call for reform is most often about trying harder at what is not working. Reform in the context of empire, in the context of scarcity, is all about better management and more automated processes. Health care reform is about reducing costs and increasing efficiency. School reform is about more certification and releasing bad teachers. Government reform is about lowering costs and taxes.

In the face of opposition, or evidence that the human or environmental costs are too high, empire adopts these kinds of reform as a guise to pretend it is healing itself. This is called reform, but it is really cosmetic change, which promotes more of what it is. Totalitarian regimes always have to call things by a name of false promise. The corporate commitment to immortality is called “succession planning.” Failures are called “development opportunities.” Innocent civilian victims are called “collateral damage.” Eliminating a thousand jobs is called “right-sizing.” Eliminating a million jobs is called “restructuring the job market.” Development is the watchword of empire, giving a positive face to its penchant for colonization. “Development” means that if you are not doing well there is something wrong with you. If

you are a country, then there are financial austerities that you have to follow. If you are an individual, then we make coaching and mentoring available to you.

What transforms is something other than what we call reform, or privatization, or development. Transformation is a shift in beliefs and an alternative narrative that follows those beliefs. It is an act of imagination that is open to the wilderness of the Exodus narrative. It is applying the language of covenant and neighborliness to the challenges of raising children, healing the earth, becoming healthy, and creating an economy that works for all. It begins with a shift in language and narrative. It continues by re-authorizing whose voices are listened to. It completes the effort with action that is small, slow, and produced by people nearby. It requires language and action that seeks a future outside the system world of solutions.