

## THE MUSTARD SEEDS OF SOCIETY



Money talks. When money talks people tend to listen because money is power. Since we live in a democracy where every citizen has one vote, America appears to be a society of equals. Who we vote for, however, often has the backing of moneyed interests – corporations and Super PACs and extremely wealthy individuals.

The message we hear about the candidates is often colored by the money behind the message. How often we hear any candidate's message is entirely dependent on the amount of money and support in the hands of the candidate.

Money is not the only powerful element unduly influencing society. Often times the common good disproportionately benefits those with power, money or social connections because of the laws we've grown up with; the traditions and the hierarchy we're accustomed to respect; or the culture in which we unconsciously participate.

The common good is the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspiration of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family. *Gaudium et Spes, #26, Second Vatican Council, 1965*

When individuals are disenfranchised and barely share in the fruits of the common good, they need help to overcome the obstacles preventing them from full participation. In today's reading Jesus describes the mustard seed as the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of all plants. And so it is with the mustard seeds of our society: once they are sown, watered and nourished instead of trod upon, they have the opportunity to spring up and become equal participants in their society.

What does this water and nourishment look like? Sometimes the solution is as simple as receiving the full benefit of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a refundable tax credit that supplements the wages of low-income workers. The more wages people earn, the more benefits their families receive until a certain point when the benefits begin to decline and finally disappear. (In 2010, this credit lifted 5.4 million people out of poverty—including 3 million children.)

The solution can often be more complex. The answer may begin with a community of disenfranchised individuals organizing behind a common purpose. This community group addresses the culture, the laws, or the institutions that wield the power of money, influence, or position, leaving the leftovers of the common good for the poor and vulnerable.

When done well, effective community organizing advances the availability of those conditions of social life which allow relatively thorough and ready access to groups and individuals for their own fulfillment. This could look the Civil Rights Marches of the 60's, the work of Cesar Chavez to organize the National Farmworkers, neighborhoods uniting to halt the construction of a Planned Parenthood facility, or bus-dependent low-income riders organizing for transit fares that are reasonable and bus stops that are safe.

Effective community organizing balances the power of the relationships between Lazarus and the rich man. "And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree, withered up the green tree, and make the withered tree bloom." (Ezekiel 17:24)

(Readings for 11th Sunday of Ordinary Time)



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace