

## **The Real Occupy Movement: Understanding Capitalism in a Christian Context**

*by lauren e treiber*

It's not difficult to hate Wall Street.

As a student of peace and justice at a small, liberal arts college, I grieve for the poor in spirit and the poor in pocket; as a daughter and sister, I grieve for my family as they face high medical bills and unemployment; as a friend of other 20-somethings, I grieve for my talented, passionate peers who graduate only to find that no one can hire them; and as a young woman with tattoos and piercings, who doesn't eat animals and --looks-- like she votes liberally, I, for all intents and purposes, should hate Wall Street. I should stand with the 99%; but I don't.

This is because I am more than a student, family member, and friend: I am a Christian; and as a bible-reading, hymn-singing Jesus-lover, what breaks my heart most is to witness a society of God-breathed individuals losing themselves in consumption, competition, and material wealth.

The book of Revelation speaks of symbolic cities: Babylon and Jerusalem --- Babylon represents our current dominant culture, and Jerusalem is God's Kingdom. As one pastor puts it, in this Babylon of ours, "you either consume or you are consumed."

Occupy Wall Street will be left behind and forgotten if its hope is to sustain our culture of Babylon, which separates communities and isolates hearts – Jesus would not have us live this way and neither should the Church.

It is valuable, however, to understand the Occupy movement and where it comes from --- operating in 900 cities without concrete leadership, it condemns anything from corporate greed and predatory banking to animal abuse and colonialism, so... it's complicated, but its roots and reasons for existing are not.

Basically, the United States struggles with a massively lopsided wealth distribution. The top 1% earns more than the bottom 50%; there are 400 Americans who own more wealth than 150 million of us. We live in a system where a small minority controls the majority of the wealth – much like 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea. Now, factor in housing crises, a 700 billion-dollar bailout, and rising unemployment, costs of education and student debt, and you end up with many people - young, educated, unemployed people – who distrust the corporate nature of Wall Street and the "American Dream." These are the Occupiers, the 99%, and they are speaking out.

It may come as a surprise, but God has a response for them.

The bible contains over 300 verses concerning social and economic justice: the poor will always be among us (Mt.26.11); the last shall be first, the first shall be last (Mt.20.16); we should trust God for our needs (Mat.6.25-34), give joyfully (Deut.16.17), and be honest in business

(Ex.20.15-16). These “core values,” as we’re used to calling them at Goshen, are fundamental to our faith as well as our involvement in capitalism.

In the book of Exodus, God’s covenant with the Hebrew people explores other policies including fairness to servants, protection of property, defense of human rights, and provision for the poor. The Sabbath was set aside so that all workers – including immigrants – could rest. And a “year of jubilee” was designed to release people from debt every seven years (Deut.15.1-2). Many theologians agree that these laws not only protected workers but prevented the overaccumulation of wealth.

Scripture does offer us a glimpse into God’s view of government and industry. His message to the Hebrew people is relevant thousands of years later; but the system we live in now will not be overturned through politics and picketing, but through Him and through one another.\

I mentioned that, even at my age and in my position, I’m not comfortable with Occupy Wall Street; not because it’s petty or unhelpful, but simply because I think Jesus has a better answer.

For example, a major critique of the movement is that it has no clear demands...so aside from, “eliminating the oppressive corporate machine,” no one knows what they want, and some people are frustrated by that. But instead of submitting to anger, we can ask ourselves the same question: what do we want and how do we work for it?

Galatians 6:7 says that we reap what we sow: but this verse is not just about finances or agriculture, though I know many of us relate to both. We sow intangible things as well, like talent and time, and with intangible investments, the quality is just as important as the amount.

Says the archbishop of Burundi (a central African country): “The church becomes an instrument of God’s love by investing in the service of love, of mending the broken world and healing the fractured communities.”

...Which leads us to Occupy’s second flaw: pointing fingers. The movement often externalizes problems and blames Wall Street as if it’s the only source of greed and corruption in this country... because it’s never us, is it?

Economically, both sides of the political aisle are at fault. On one hand [right], there’s Reagan’s mantra that calls government a problem, not a solution and blindly applies it to the nation’s finances. On the other hand [left hand] are politicians pressuring Frannie Mae and Freddie Mac to offer easy loan terms so that Americans don’t need the self-discipline to save up for what they want or need.

But we live in a democracy, and democracies usually really good at creating institutions that reflect their citizens’ values... we just so happened to request that our institutions promote

the accumulation of personal wealth. We demand things like this because we feel entitled to them.

The 99% is not innocent – we aren't the executives of Goldman Sachs, but we still spend beyond our means. We still wear shirts from China, pants from Pakistan, and drink Colombian coffee that pays farmers 13% of what they worked for. Without even trying, we exploit our brothers and sisters, which doesn't make us corrupt or evil, but it should make us humble. It should help us to step away from this sense of entitlement.

Another setback of Occupy that troubles me is the judgment of the "1%." Its name makes sense, but we are often quick to generalize and condemn people once we've boxed them up and labeled them as an "enemy." Jesus did speak with the marginalized, but he also ate dinner with tax collectors. His audience was poor and privileged, because sin is the same for both parties. We, just like the 1%, are imperfect, self-absorbed, broken people; and the 1%, just like us, are resourceful and creative and kind. We don't have to agree with our enemies, but if they are created in God's image, how can we not love them?

I find the finger-pointing and name-calling a little absurd because this Occupy movement accuses Wall Street of corruption and in the same breath demands not only that it change but that it take better care of them!

So, here's my quick brainstorm of what could be done to take better care of the 99%: we could invest in education and green technology, develop stronger infrastructure, set up public banks, democratize social market sectors ... it sounds great, but reforms would only put us back where we were 30 years ago – as a nation of industrious people who account for 5% of the world's population and consume a quarter of its resources.

Political action is often used as a shortcut for the harder work of being a socially active Church. If we can't change people's minds, we settle for controlling their behavior through laws instead – but that does not solve the problem; it just conceals it. We have to remember that we are free not because of the Constitution, but because of Christ, and that He expects us to use that freedom to make His heart visible in the world.

My point is this: We don't need permission from the United States to build God's Kingdom on earth.

I have a request tonight. It's very simple: I ask that we ground ourselves in hope and know where hope comes from.

Matthew 6 says that wherever our treasures lie, there our hearts will be also; I don't think our collective human heart is vaulted in the Federal Reserve. I think it is in the humbling knowledge that our Creator made all of us, put us all here, with all of this, to do something tremendous for Him.

So, my fellow 99%:

If we regulate corporations, if we place caps on executive pay, and if we promote cooperative enterprise, we can close the gaping holes between incomes and classes. We can restore the nation's faith in capitalism. We can repair, in small ways, our Babylon.

But: if we share what we have, if we treat others' needs as our spiritual obligation, if our treasures are relationships and not things, if we love the poor, the sick and the hurting and the lost: we will make brothers and sisters out of strangers, we will share Good news for all people, we will transform the face of this culture and build Jerusalem on earth.

When Jesus lives in every American heart, rich or poor, it is then and only then can we step away from Wall Street, from Zuccotti Park, from our cozy suburbs and college campuses and say that we have participated in a movement of true Occupation.