

How Do You Measure A Nation?

Ken Olson

“A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.” The statement belongs to Gandhi, but very similar thoughts were voiced by Thomas Jefferson, Jimmy Carter, the writer Pearl Buck, and others. The list does not include Donald Trump, and neither would we expect it to. His talk of “making America great again” is almost entirely about wealth and power. I have never heard him mention, with the least bit of understanding or sympathy, the poor, the weak, the most vulnerable.

It's no surprise that the combined net worth of members of a president's Cabinet would total tens of millions of dollars. But U. S. News and World Report discovered that, at only week five of Trump's administration, just the handful of his key advisors and appointees were worth more than \$344.4 billion --with a “b.” (Reminder: it takes a thousand times a thousand to make a million and a thousand millions to make a billion. Boggle, boggle.) There are 195 countries in the world; the wealth of just those few individuals total more than the annual gross domestic product of the bottom 169 countries, combined! Anyone who thinks that is not obscene, and not a recipe for some immense disaster, is callous and oblivious, both.

The extremely high deathrates of children in some of those countries will spike much higher due to the massive cuts to USAID. The richest nation on earth “cannot afford such aid,” but are we not also members of the family of humanity and citizens of the world? Are lives that are not American worth nothing? As stated in sacred writ, “The love of money is the root of all evil.”

Because so many of Trump's spokespersons promoting those radical and heartless cuts wear crosses in public, we need to be reminded that the Gospels clearly indicate on which side Jesus would stand in today's rich/poor divide. (Someone here said I should “open my Bible,” so here goes.) One of many relevant texts is the pointed story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Please read it.

And in Matthew 19, Jesus stuns us by saying, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! ...I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” In 1908, the

English writer G. K. Chesterton, with acerbic wit, commented, “I know that the most modern manufacturer has been really occupied in trying to produce an abnormally large needle. I know that the most recent biologists have been chiefly anxious to discover a very small camel.”

All of us are uneasy with admonitions that question our self-satisfied situations, as in the words of Saint Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century: "When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard belongs to the poor."

As individuals and as a society, we devise all sorts of rationalizations for not acting to sufficiently care for sick, hungry, and homeless people, but I think we know, deep in our hearts, that Basil was not wrong.

Many years ago, the writer Rudyard Kipling journeyed from afar to McGill University in Montreal, Canada to deliver a commencement address. He asked the students to consider how they defined success, and warned them against pursuing wealth, position, power and glory, saying, “Someday, you will meet someone who cares for none of those things, and you will know then just how poor you really are.”

Call to mind people who seem most to have found a kind of inner direction, a serenity or strength, peace or joy that is deep and profound. Whatever their station in life, they have this in common: their emphasis is not on getting but on giving. Their focus is not on what others can do for them but on what they can do for others. The center of their existence is not themselves, but all things bigger. By not having been overly cautious about losing their lives, they have, instead, found them.

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