

Taxes, Morality and The National Debt

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Last Friday, like millions of other citizens of this nation, I reviewed my federal income tax return one last time, attached a check for more than I earned in a year in my first church, stuffed the whole thing into an envelope and dropped it off at the post-office. I have been doing this, now, for more years than I like to count, and every year it is the same. Although Beverly and I try to be scrupulous about reporting all our income, and although we carefully document every deduction we claim, and although we check and recheck our math and make certain we have signed the return and that our social security numbers are correct, the moment that envelope has dropped into the mail slot at the post office, I begin to get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I always feel as if I had just completed a final examination, that my entire future hangs on my performance, and that although I had written pages in answer to the single exam question, the truth is that I hadn't the foggiest idea of what the question was about. Always, when the tax forms are mailed, I have the feeling that I have made a grave mistake somewhere along the line and that it will come back to haunt me when I least expect it.

This year, however, my misgivings about having inadvertently tripped over some detail in the tax laws were minimized by several recent experiences which forced me to reflect upon other issues--issues having to do with taxes and morality and the national debt. With your indulgence, I would like to share some of those experiences with you, in an effort to suggest a perspective upon taxes and our obligations to each other that may be different from the one most frequently heard at this time of the year.

My contract with the church entitles me to a week of vacation sometime during the church year--a time intended to allow me to catch my breath and recharge my batteries at a point when that is most needed. This year, I took the week after Easter, and spent most of it in Boston. I had no agenda in Boston--no appointments to keep, no meetings to attend, no obligations to meet. I spent most of my time simply walking around the city--up and down Beacon Hill, into the Back Bay area, into bookstores--Beverly was relieved that I traveled on foot, and therefore could not acquire too many new volumes to add to our already over-crowded bookshelves--into a coffee shop for coffee or a restaurant for a bite of lunch. Mostly I was putting my mind in neutral and giving my body a much needed physical work-out. I went where my feet took me, feasting my eyes on the sights, my ears on the sounds, delighting in watching people as they came and went on countless unnamed errands.

Inevitably, no matter where I wandered, I eventually found myself in the Boston Common and the Public Garden. Surrounded by old buildings and churches from the early days of the republic, and by an outer ring of tall, modern towers, the Common and

the Garden seem determined to preserve some small space against circling modernity. There is no place I know that is quite like the Public Garden in early spring. As I walked through the Garden and on into the adjoining Common, it seemed to me that the entire place was straining to produce spring. The grass was green--new-born green, the trees were on the verge of bursting with small, new leaves. The branches of tulip trees were tipped with heavy buds waiting to burst open, and at the base of the trees, yellow daffodils had already exploded into colorful life. The squirrels and gulls and pigeons and ducks had shaken off winter's doldrums and were cavorting in the spring sunshine, and hopeful robins hopped here and there, stopping to listen for a careless worm. The drivers on the surrounding streets drove along on their frantic errands, but the Common and the Public Garden were determined pause and just to be spring.

A surprising number of people were affiliating with the spring. Young parents found time to walk with their children in the park. Young people and old exercised their dogs. An occasional elderly woman or man practiced Tai Chi. Cyclists ignored the signs ordering them to walk their bikes and peddled through the park. Others skated through the drained pond which, by summer, would be filled with water. And, of course, there were joggers everywhere. Here, at the heart of a great city, life suddenly took on a different pace, a more natural rhythm. Little wonder that I found myself drawn back to the Public Garden again and again.

After a while, I began to notice another group of people in the Public Garden. They were not waking dogs, or exercising, or jogging. Rather, they shuffled along, carrying plastic bags. One of them, an elderly Asian woman carried several bags slung on a pole which she wore like a yoke over her stooped and slender shoulders. Each of these people would approach a trash can, gingerly sort through its sticky contents, find the discarded soft-drink cans and bottles and place them in the plastic bags. Clearly, these people were trying to scrape together a living by scavenging the discards of the society around them. For most people, the five cent refund offered for the can or bottle was not worth the trouble to carry the empty container out of the park. For this small army of poorly clad, ill-fed women and men, the five-cent refund was the margin of survival.

From the Public Garden, my feet sometimes found their way to Quincy Market--a place of boutiques and small shops, of restaurants and pubs, a place bustling with activity. As I walked among the shops and stalls and pushcarts, it suddenly occurred to me that there was virtually nothing for sale in that market that could be considered necessary for life. The economic existence of that place was focused on selling souvenirs and knickknacks and trivia: One shop specialized in T-shirts with cute messages; another offered gadgets extolling the virtues of being left-handed; A third was devoted to selling memorabilia from "Cheers," a Boston tavery which never really existed except in a television program; and one place sold only items which were purple.

On my way back, as I left the Market and made my way through the old commercial center of Boston, I encountered that army of despair which is growing in every city in this nation. On the fringes of the Market dedicated to the selling of trivia, stood the men and women--young, old, of indeterminate age--ill-clad, ill fed, pleading with passers-by

for a few coins. Most were the same kind of people you would meet in any of our cities, standing at busy intersections, extending paper cups, but some Boston panhandlers seem somewhat more literate. Frequently they sat or stood with down-cast eyes beside hand-lettered signs outlining their plight:

"Hungry and homeless. I am a disabled veteran who lost his job when the company closed. I have tried to find work without any success. Please help me."

"I have lost my job. I hope to relocate to another city in May, but I have no money for transportation. I would appreciate any help you can give me. I have no where else to turn."

"Please, can you spare some change? I am very hungry. I have no home. I have no family or friends. God bless you."

As I passed these people, I dropped money into the cups or the hands of those I encountered. As I offered change to one of the beggars, I overheard a conversation between two well-dressed young men passing by to the left of me. "Look at that. We'll never be able to clear those bums out of the city if fools keep giving them money."

I came home from my Boston trip to find an envelope from my son, Stephen waiting among the accumulated mail. In it was an article he had written for the Washington Post. In the article he detailed the growing violence in the Nation's capitol--the dreadful toll it is taking among the city's young people, and the sense of hopelessness and despair which both generates and grows out of that violence. I read it carefully and I wept.

Later in the week, I turned on the radio to hear a report that a study has demonstrated what we have known in our guts for a long time--that the nation's children have been the primary victims of the poverty and despair which has spread through the nation's under class during the past decade, that by 1990, one child in four in this nation was living in dire poverty. Can anyone doubt that there is a connection between that statistic and the violence that is tearing our society apart? And I found myself remembering my son's concluding words from that article in the Washington Post,

We should be ashamed...We should hang our heads in disgrace when beautiful brown children grow up to be hard-hearted adults who ravage their own communities because of the crimes committed against them.

These were the thoughts and experiences which flowed through my mind as I paid my taxes this year. I found myself wondering why, in this rich nation, we are unwilling to commit our resources to save our great cities and to rescue those who are being ground up and spit out by the economic system. And as I have pondered that question, it has occurred to me that part of the problem relates to the fact that we have chosen to live in a culture of scarcity. We have chosen to believe that there are simply not enough resources to go around, that if we divided the available resources evenly the result would be universal poverty and therefore we must adopt a lifeboat ethic in confronting social

problems. Some people simple must be sacrificed if others are to survive and prosper. This means that some people will be buying useless but expensive junk in Quincy Market, while others will be reduced to scavenging bottles and cans from the trash, or pleading for a few coins from passers-by, and that is how it must be. This neo-darwinian view of the world assumes that resources are limited and that in the competition for limited resources, there must be winners and losers, and that there is nothing much that can be done to change that harsh fact.

Of course, this judgment is always modified in practice by active racism and classism. When the Savings and Loan Industry collapsed under the weight of fraud, greed and mismanagement, we were not willing to allow the lifeboat ethic to function unchecked. Despite the size of the national debt, we moved to create a massive welfare program, the largest transfer of wealth in our history, to protect the potential victims--most of whom were not people of color or poor people. In our culture, poor people are not victims; by definition, they are inadequate and trying to help them is like pounding sand down a rat-hole, an endless, pointless, useless exercise. If they had any gumption or value and worth, they would not be poor, they would not be the children of the poor.

As I paid my taxes this year, I found myself wondering what kind of society we might create if we were able to think of ourselves as living in a culture not of scarcity, but of sufficiency, if we dared to believe that there are resources enough for all of us to live comfortably if we were determined to a more equitable distribution of those resources. To begin with, we would no longer function on the assumption that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, in which I can only win if you lose, in which if you win, I must lose and therefore, we must be prepared to compete ruthlessly, for winning is the only thing. Rather, we would begin to suspect that there is no real winning for anyone which does not encompass the success of everyone. And then we might begin to understand that income tax paid to support social programs is not a matter of taking from me and giving to someone else, but rather a means by which we pool our common resources to confront our common needs. A single payer health plan covering everyone and paid for by our taxes, a program to assist single,often teen-aged mothers with child-care, and training, and housing so they may raise their children with dignity and adequacy, an approach to drugs which spends money to rehabilitate rather than incarcerate, a crime bill which spends money for intervention rather than vengeance, an approach to education which spends money on those who need it most because they have the fewest private resources would not be viewed as taking my money and giving it to someone else. Rather, it would be seen as a way of using our common resources to deal with our common problems in order to create a humane society in which the human spirit can grow and thrive. In a culture of sufficiency, the focus would not be on winning, or accumulating the most, but upon keeping the process going and maintaining a healthy social order.

It is argued, of course, that we cannot afford to undertake social programs because we are burdened by a massive national debt, and because most of the recipients of social programs are beyond help anyway. I grew up in a culture of poverty, and I know that people are not expendable simply because they are poor; poor people simply have fewer resources and need more help and help that is reliable and compassionabe and responsive.

What is more, treating those who have lost out in the scramble for wealth and position as expendable and beyond help serves to create a massive national debt which does not show up directly in the accountants' ledgers, but which accumulates interest and grows exponentially, nonetheless. One need only reflect on the violence in our inner cities, and the increasing number of children who are growing up in poverty, stunted by hopelessness and despair, to begin to understand the social debt we are accumulating and passing on to the generations who will receive this world from our hands. Red ink in the national budget is insignificant in comparison to the tide of bloody violence which awaits a nation committed to a vision of scarcity, a nation which tolerates and defines as normal a social order in which the rich get richer and the poor become increasingly desperate. The two strangers walking past me in Boston were right: I am a fool if I think that putting a few coins in the hands of a beggar will much change his world or mine for the better. At most it may delay the debacle. But deciding to live in a culture of sufficiency, and pooling our resources so that a creative response to poverty and need is attempted--that might make a difference. And, my friends, that is what government is for.

These are the thoughts which passed through my mind on Friday, as I paid my income tax. I do not resent paying them. I would be willing to see my taxes increased if the money were used to address the nation's social debt which threatens to overwhelm us all. But, of course, the common wisdom is that people who live in communities like Summit and Westfield and New Providence and Short Hills and Basking Ridge will not tolerate being taxed to pay for social experiments. Perhaps it is time to confound the common wisdom. Perhaps the best investment we could make in our own future is to insist that the tax structure be used to pool our resources for some creative social experiments by means of which we seek to reduce the social debts which threaten to destroy the fabric of our society.