

Choose Which Master

Kathryn Haueisen



I never know how to respond to people on street corners looking for assistance. Our church prepares snack packets to distribute. I've given those away. I keep water bottles in my car to hand out, because where I live the temperature can easily approach 100 degrees. Only once have I given out money—to the young woman with a small child I encountered in a grocery store parking lot. She said she needed to buy food. I believed her.

My problem with these responses to poverty is that they seem like starting at the wrong end of the issue. Why do these people need to beg from strangers? Why don't we see the benefits of paying adequate salaries? How did this enormous imbalance of financial resources come about, and what can I do about it?

Jesus said we'd always have the poor among us. Apparently we'll also always have money-grabbing, unethical opportunists among us. Perhaps the solution lies with those of us living between these two economic extremes.

I can think of several small steps to take:

- **Support smaller, locally owned businesses.**
- **Reduce. Reuse. Recycle so we don't use more than our fair share of available resources.**
- **Tip generously, and engage service staff in caring conversations.**
- **Give often and generously to agencies that address problems of hunger and homelessness. Many faith-based nonprofits do commendable work in this area.**
- **Read about the complex twenty-first-century global economy, and reflect on your place in it. Consider, for example, the relationship between low-price goods and services, and many workers' low wages.**

Jesus taught that it's impossible to serve two masters. We have to decide—and keep deciding—if we will place our trust in the economy or the Lord. When we actually trust God to provide what we need, we can focus on doing what we can with what we have—trusting that what we need will appear when we need it.

That doesn't exonerate us from working. It does free us from obsessing about the Dow Jones. It frees us to respond according to our individual skills, passions, and opportunities.

Our response could mean feeding the homeless, writing and calling decision-makers about policies affecting the poor, or volunteering where the poor are served.

No single one of us is capable of eliminating poverty. Each of us is capable of deciding whom we will serve: the God of the ages or the gods of the economy.

Kathryn Haueisen is a retired ELCA pastor and a newlywed. Her retirement plans are to enjoy being married again, spend time with family, volunteer, and write. She lives in Houston but is willing to travel to just about anywhere the opportunity to do so comes along.