

## COVID-19 Musing Social Classes June 17, 2020 North Star Mennonite Church Dan Graber

Robert Reich, a person I follow, has the following article in the Guardian magazine and on facebook that describes what he sees in America. But I think it may be a good tool to evaluate and compare Canadian society and politics and economics. I think this gives us another tool to understand our current society as well as reflect of what God's view of justice is.

Are we as a society willing to structure ourselves better so that we resist racism; pay that doesn't offer a good standard of living; a closer gap between the have's and have not's; a more democratic society; and so on. Please enjoy and debate!

How do we love our neighbor economically, with equal opportunities; equal education, and so on?

"Give **justice** to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute,"  
(Psalm 82:3).

"Learn to **do** good; seek **justice**, correct oppression; bring **justice** to the fatherless, and please the widow's cause,"  
(Isaiah 1:17).

"The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Proverbs 29:7).

The article is titled:

It was published on April 26, 2020.

### **Covid-19 pandemic shines a light on a new kind of class divide and its inequalities,**

The Covid-19 pandemic is putting the deepening class divide in America into stark relief. Four new classes are emerging.

**The Remotes:** These are professional, managerial, and technical workers – an estimated 35% of the workforce – who are putting in long hours at their laptops, Zooming into conferences, scanning electronic documents, and collecting about the same pay as before the crisis. Many are bored or anxious, but they're well off compared to the three other classes.

**The Essentials:** They're about 30% of workers, including nurses, homecare and childcare workers, farm workers, food processors, truck drivers, warehouse and transit workers, drugstore employees, sanitation workers, police officers, firefighters, and the military.

Too many Essentials lack adequate protective gear, paid sick leave, health insurance, and childcare, which is especially important now that schools are shuttered. They also deserve hazard pay. (As more than one person has commented: I didn't sign up for the danger of the military. Instead I signed up to care for people.)

Their vulnerability is generating a wave of worker activism at businesses such as Instacart, Amazon, Walmart, and Whole Foods. Mass-transit workers are organizing work stoppages. (We could add meat packing plants whose workers Trump wants to go back to work, but many say they are not safe because adequate PPE is not provided.) Trump's Occupational Safety and Health Administration has the legal authority to require private employers provide essential workers with protective gear. But don't hold your breath as we see from the lack of enforcement.

**The Unpaid:** They're an even larger group than the unemployed – whose ranks could soon reach 25%, the same as in the Great Depression. Some of the unpaid are furloughed or have used up their paid leave. So far in this crisis, 43% of adults report they or someone in their household has lost jobs or pay, according to the Pew Research Center. An estimated 9.2 million have lost their employer-provided health insurance. And some can not receive unemployment if they are deemed essential, but fear working.

Many of these jobs had been in personal services that can't be done remotely, such as retail, restaurant, and hospitality work. But as consumers rein in spending, layoffs are spreading to news organizations, tech companies, and consumer-goods manufacturers. The unpaid mostly need cash to feed their families and pay rent. So far, the government has failed them. Fewer than half say they have enough emergency funds to cover three months of expenses, according to a survey conducted this month by Pew. (This makes sense since they don't make enough to save for a rainy day – just earn barely enough from paycheck to pay check.)

So far, government has failed them, too. Checks mailed out by the US Treasury last week are a pittance. Extra benefits could help, but unemployment offices are so overwhelmed with claims that they can't get money out the door. Loans to small businesses have gone largely to big, well-connected businesses, with banks collecting fat fees.

On Wednesday, Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said he is opposed to any further federal aid to state and local governments, suggesting states declare bankruptcy instead. Which means even less money for unemployment insurance, Medicaid, and everything else the unpaid need. The resulting desperation is fueling demands to “reopen the economy” long before it's safe. If it comes down to a choice between risking one's health and putting food on the table, many will take the latter.

**The Forgotten:** This group includes everyone for whom social distancing is nearly impossible because they're packed tightly into places most Americans don't see: prisons, jails for undocumented immigrants, camps for migrant farmworkers, Native American reservations, homeless shelters, and nursing homes.

While much of New York City is sheltering at home, for example, more than 17,000 men and women, many already in poor health, are sleeping in roughly 100 shelters for single adults. All such places are becoming hotspots for the virus. These people need safe spaces with proper medical care, adequate social distancing, testing for the virus and isolation of those who have contracted it. Few are getting any of this.

Not surprisingly, the essentials, the unpaid, and the forgotten are disproportionately poor, black, and Latino. Not surprisingly, the Essentials, the Unpaid, and the Forgotten are disproportionately poor, black, and Latino and they are disproportionately becoming infected.

An Associated Press breakdown of available state and local data showed close to 33% of those who have died from Covid-19 are African American, despite representing only 14% of the total population in areas surveyed. The Navajo Nation already has lost more people to coronavirus than have 13 states. Four of the 10 largest-known sources of infection in the United States have been correctional facilities.

**These last three groups aren't getting what they need to survive this crisis because they don't have lobbyists and political action committees to do their bidding in Washington or state capitals.**

The Remotes among us should be concerned, and not just because of the unfairness of the Covid-19 class divide. If the Essentials aren't sufficiently protected, the Unpaid are forced back to work earlier than is

safe, and if the Forgotten remain forgotten, no one is secure. Covid-19 will continue to spread sickness and death for months, if not years to come.

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What is your reaction to an article like this? Why?

Are there counter arguments and / or articles you would like to offer?

How does Canada measure up? In comparison to the United States? To Denmark? To Haiti?

Are there a few key directions we can work at and encourage the government to improve?

Foreign aid through governments and charities are important but what can we do to encourage a change of outlook, behavior and so on to meet Micah's standard of: **"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good -- And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** (6:8) This was in a condemnation of Israel within a prosecuting charge by the Creator for their disobedience and disloyalty and their oppression of their own people.

Can we rethink our priorities as nations?

Personal note: I'm a capitalist. It's the best economic system. But I think we can see that our form of capitalism – at least in the US, but also in many places around the world, is simply not just.

It's ironic that the pandemic is labeling people, "essential workers," who for the most part, are lower paid persons and practically are being treated as if they are disposable.

And it's sad how much US federal aid has landed in the hands of big corporations, many of whom are not passing that aid on to their workers. We see how many corporations received major tax breaks as well as the recent aid, but they have spent the money to buy back stock and give out big bonuses to a few people – not the "essentials." More than one billionaire refuses to offer better health care, protection & pensions.

We do rejoice with the few positive examples from board rooms and owners we hear – but they are so few and many offer so little.

The coronavirus is helping us to not deny that much is seriously wrong with the way we think and act and are as a society. We need to take the Biblical warnings very seriously. We are not exempt.