

SHOULD YOU REMAIN A HAVE-NOT? An important message
sent down from a Have to Have-Nots

--Willis Elliott

This Have writes this memo to you Have-Nots as a reflection on a recent experience I had when addressing an audience of Have-Nots. In the question period, a militant black asked me, "Don't we (poor blacks) have the same right to make it in the world as you affluent whites?"

My response was, "I should say not! You want to wreck everything? Just a little more extension of the affluent-white life-style into the lives of you Third-Worlders and the earth would become unlivable! Irreversible pollution of water-soil-air, irreplaceable waste of precious metals and fossil fuel! Corruption and impoverishment! Aren't you sensitive to the looming threat of the good earth's rape and death?"

"Then, if we don't have the right to live the way you live, you don't either!"

"That's right."

Silence.

She: "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

I: "I don't know. I just don't know. At Christmastime, advertisers say 'For the man who has everything.' That's me. There's nothing the good earth can offer that I don't have. All the love I need--maybe even more than's good for me. And all the money: there's nothing I want that I haven't already bought. All the land: I don't want to be land-burdened, and I have just the right amount for my needs, including leisure. All the success: I'm not hankering for any realities or marks of success, and fleeting fame has never allured me. All the friends: They take precious time, and I may already have a few too many. All the grace: According to my paradigm and heart, God loves me with a real-love through and beyond all my deviations and betrayals, and forgives me when I return to my senses and his will. Is there any of this you would give up if you had all this?"

Silence. "No, I guess not. But you claim to be a Christian. Didn't Jesus say, 'Go, sell all you have, and give to the poor'?"

I: "Yes indeed he did, and it makes me uncomfortable every time I think of it. What would you do about it if you were in my position?"

Silence. "I just don't know. But I think you should think about it harder than you are."

I: "What does that mean? Are you advising me to take this word of Jesus literally? If you are, but admit--as you just have--that you wouldn't know whether you'd do it yourself if you were in my position, are you not a hypocrite?"

Silence. "I suppose I would be. But I still feel you're rationalizing yourself into getting off easy."

I: "Easy is something my religion, my commitment to God through Jesus, forbids. But my faith calls me to full participation in the joys of the good earth, and so honor the Creator, as well as to suffer with the Redeemer in no-saying to injustice and betrayal, lust and greed, and their attendant evils. You

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might say, 'Shalom eventually: why not now?' The last king of France rationalized that he was enjoying the good things representatively, on behalf of the masses, as they themselves had no hope of doing so. But it turned out they did have such a hope, and the king literally lost his head. And speaking of 'the good things' reminds me that Father Abraham (L.16.25) distributes them to us either here or there: if now, not later (in "Abraham's bosom"); if not now (as in the case of Lazarus), later. But I can't turn this into an arithmetical calculus of delayed gratification, a sort of transcendentalized capitalism. Yet the story keeps me uncomfortable, and sensitive to opportunities to relieve myself of the weight of conscience. I should add that I have no doubt the Spirit sometimes uses Jesus' rigorism as a direct call to voluntary poverty, nor any doubt that the world, if it's to survive hale and healthy, will need Haves who are willing to move in the direction of voluntary reduction of their high-level consumption--and, in ways I need not speak of, I and my family are moving in that direction, and are in the polar tension between false-prophet relaxed life-style and true-prophet rigorist life-style. But no hope of comfort till Kingdom come. At the heart of my faith is One whose very being reveals God's profound disappointment with what we humans have done with the good earth and each other and with God, and the cross reveals humanity's profound disappointment with what God has to say to us: prosperity cults flourish, God-become-Man is executed. The fact that Jesus was, in the eyes of the authorities, a radical of the radicals--that's a permanent warning to those who call themselves Christians that a merely comfortable, world-enjoying life-style is ruled out. What remains is the question *What actional shape should my divine discomfort take here and now, given my genes, pains, and options?* Helping me answer that question is one of the proper functions of the Christian community, beginning with my family and my local church."

Now, the verbatim above might be used, case-method, by a group of Christians at work on "Economics and the Gospel" or (as at present, fall '78, in my own local church) "Faithful Conduct in Business." The earth is both the Lord's (Ps.24.1) and ours (Ps. 115.16)--and who are "we"? What, in the comprehensive sense, is "Christian stewardship," here and now, end of the 20th century? What motivational constellation, passive and active--i.e., affecting us, and used by us--is now "good" (the Hebrew word meaning both "beautiful" and "appropriate," as God saw what he had made: Gn.1.25)? As a Christian theologian, my primary sphere of "doing theology" on this is my own life--not telling others what to do; and my perplexity is not different from that of all other "advantaged" Christians in this and any other culture. If I "sell all" and give all the money to the poor except what I need to buy a begging bowl, I'll have resolved my internal tension but not solved the problem. I come, therefore, saying not *I can help you* or *Can you help me?* but *Are you willing to work with me on this task, that our Christian action and witness may be both more intelligent and more compassionate, and our Christian contribution to agenda humana, the human task today, more helpful?*