

Giving Ourselves a Little Credit (Isa. 1.10-20)
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August 12, 2007

Hear the word of the LORD,
You chieftains of Sodom;
Give ear to our God's instruction,
You folk of Gomorrah!¹

Muhammad Yunus had never felt the stirring in the university where he taught, though the book-lined hallways had been his home for years. He loved the elegance of economic theory, the discussion of complex systems, and the emergence of innovative concepts. And he had always been an excellent student who hoped to become a professor. Coming home to Bangladesh to accept a post at the university had been a near dream come true. Even so, Muhammad had never felt the stirring at the university—the stirring that he felt that day, the day in 1976 when he decided to venture outside of the Economics Department to do a bit of field research in the village nearby. Muhammad was interested in learning if there was anything that he might do, as an economist, to help the Bangladeshi poor. So he invited one or two students and a colleague to join him. Together they walked the short distance from the classroom to the village. That is where the stirring began.

The stirring was subtle at first. Muhammad knew that in the village he would come face to face with extreme poverty. So he was somewhat prepared to see the crumbling mud houses, the chickens scavenging in the road, and the naked children playing in the dust. Muhammad didn't really begin to feel the stirring until he spoke with the woman, until whatever it was began to fit into the story of a real person. Her name was Sufiya,

¹ The Isaiah text is quoted from *The Jewish Study Bible: featuring The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

and he was only able to speak with her with a bit of patience and determination. After all, Sufiya lived in the Muslim section of the village and it was not customary for a woman there to speak with a strange man, even a respected professor of economics. But Muhammad was a native to the region who spoke the local dialect and meant no harm. He stood politely outside of Sufiya's house and complimented her on one of her sons, who was playing there. "He is very beautiful, this one," Muhammad said.² It brought Sufiya to the doorway with a smile. Then, over the course of an informal interview, Muhammad learned that Sufiya was a maker of bamboo stools. In order to buy her raw materials, she was forced to borrow money from a local lender called a *paikar*. As a part of the lending agreement, she was forced to sell her wares directly to the lender at a personal profit of fifty poysa, which is about two U.S. cents. It was just enough profit to keep her children from starving, but not enough to do anything but continue the cycle of poverty in which they lived. Sufiya told Muhammad that she knew others who borrowed even more and paid much higher interest rates of ten percent a week; one of her neighbors even paid ten percent a day! As Muhammad listened, he realized that the system Sufiya was describing fixed most of the poor firmly in their places, and, in some cases, made them even poorer by the day.

The stirring was happening now, he could feel it. Muhammad described it in his book, *Banker to the Poor*, "Sufiya...earned two cents a day," he wrote. "It was this knowledge that shocked me. In my university courses, I theorized about sums in the millions of dollars, but here before my eyes the problems of life and death were posed in terms of pennies. Something was wrong. Why did my university courses not reflect the

² Muhammad Yunus with Alan Jolis, *Banker to the Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), p. 46.

reality of Sufiya's life? I was angry, angry at myself, angry at my economics department and the thousands of intelligent professors who had not tried to address this problem and solve it...[Sufiya's] children were condemned to live a life of penury, of hand-to-mouth survival, just as she had lived it before them, and as her parents did before her. I had never heard of anyone suffering for the lack of [pennies]...It seemed impossible to me, preposterous."³

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?”
Says the LORD.
“I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,
And suet of fatlings,
And blood of bulls;
And I have no delight
In lambs and he-goats.
That you come to appear before Me—
Who asked that of you?”

During his first series of visits to the village, Muhammad began to make a list of the people he met who were being exploited by the predatory practices of the moneylenders. When his list was complete, it contained the names of 42 villagers who owed a combined total of 27 dollars. Muhammad mulled the list. 42 people and their families whose lives could be completely transformed by such a small sum of money. In the beginning, he simply loaned the money from his own pocket and asked the people to repay him when they were able. But this single act would not be enough, and Muhammad was haunted by the questions it raised. Why were the people of the village only able to access capital through the *paikar* loan sharks? How could they ever hope to break the generational cycles of poverty without any structures of support? Muhammad considered what he knew of conventional bank loans and criteria. In order to take out a loan, a person

³ Yunus and Jolis, *Banker to the Poor*, p. 48.

needed to have collateral, assets. In his own words, “Banking is based on the principle that the more you have, the more you can get. You have nothing, you get nothing. [But] I thought the right thing would be if you have nothing, you’re the one who should get the highest priority.”⁴

The stirring was now leading Muhammad to a prophetic way of looking at the problem. He began to see through the conventional structures of rich and poor, lending and repayment, university and village, and get a glimpse of something else. With a bit of imagination, Muhammad could envision a world where the structures worked very differently. He hoped that perhaps others might share this vision. It is perfectly doable, he thought, to use the structures to empower the poor rather than holding them back. And the risk of trying was virtually nil. Muhammad was beginning to get excited. He went to the bank to ask for help.

“Trample My courts no more;
Bringing oblations is futile,
Incense is offensive to Me.
New moon and sabbath,
Proclaiming of solemnities,
Assemblies with iniquity,
I cannot abide.
Your new moons and fixed seasons
Fill Me with loathing;
They are become a burden to Me,
I cannot endure them.
And when you lift up your hands,
I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.”

It would be an understatement to say that the bank officer was surprised. Although it was a privilege to have the distinguished professor of economics visit the local branch,

⁴ Interview from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, November 16, 2006.

his request sounded crazy to anyone who had been trained by conventional standards. “I have a proposal,” Muhammad told him. “I want you to lend money to the poor people in [the village]...The amount involved is very small. I have already done it myself. I have lent twenty-seven dollars to forty-two people. There will be many more poor people who will need money. They need this money to carry on their work, to buy raw materials and supplies.”⁵ The bank officer listened incredulously. Muhammad spoke of the usurious practices of the moneylenders, the vicious cycle of extreme poverty, the ways in which people were forced into lifetimes of servitude, and the fact that small sums of lent money could change everything. So he had come to ask the bank to lend money to the poor. According to Muhammad, when he finished talking the bank officer simply began to laugh. He explained how he could never loan money to the poor and ran down a long litany of reasons why this was obvious—the loan amounts were too small, the people were illiterate and could not fill out the application forms, there was no collateral, and so on. Muhammad countered every one of these arguments before the exasperated bank officer put his hands on the desk and told him that he was simply an idealist. He was unrealistic and didn’t know how things really worked. But Muhammad followed with a question that hinted that the bank officer might be the one who didn’t know how things worked. On the matter of collateral, he noted that the poorest of the poor worked for survival. They do not borrow and repay as the rich do, optionally. Their borrowing and repayment is a matter of life and death. What more collateral could one ask for?

“Your hands are stained with crime—
Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from my sight.

⁵ Yunus and Jolis, *Banker to the Poor*, p. 51.

Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good.
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.”

Muhammad Yunus was convinced that the real crime was conceptual. Based on limited concepts, we have created a system that divides rich and poor—rich countries and poor countries, rich people and poor people—putting each person and country into a box from which they cannot escape. The categories were fundamentally mistaken, he thought, held in place by structures that allowed the rich to get richer and aphorisms that suggested that the poor would always be with us. But all of these concepts sell us short, rich and poor alike. Muhammad began to see that poverty is not natural. It is an artificial creation, an imposition. If we could only remove some of the barriers that we have created in our own minds, he was certain that we would find a deeper truth. For Muhammad this truth was that people are intrinsically gifted and possess incredible creativity. By simply providing the means for people to exercise their own creativity, they could find themselves empowered to cross the poverty line on their own. It was just that the playing field so favored the already-rich, the luckily-born, and the boxed-in status quo. The conversation Muhammad had with the bank officer was actually a perfect example. What the officer lacked was an ability to exercise his own creativity, to think in new ways, and to envision a different, socially-conscious way of doing business. He lacked a prophetic imagination and a longing for what could be. But this was not so for Muhammad.

Failing to gain the support of the local bank with its conventional models, Muhammad started his own bank and called it Grameen Bank, which means “village bank.” He

called it trust-based banking and set up a system wherein the poor borrowed in groups and held each other to account for repayment. The initial sums to be lent were small and the payment schedule was kept simple. Muhammad insisted that the project's key idea was its communal nature. "If Grameen was to work," he wrote, "We knew we had to trust our clients. From day one, we knew that there would be no room for policing in our system. We never used courts to settle our repayments. We did not involve lawyers or any outsiders. Today, commercial banks assume that every borrower is going to run away with their money, so they tie their clients up in legal knots...In contrast, Grameen assumes that every borrower is honest. There are no legal instruments between the lenders and the borrowers...Grameen would succeed or fail based on the strength of our personal relationships."⁶ What Muhammad had imagined was a radical conceptual shift. A bank for the poor, run mostly by the poor, not for the purpose of making tremendous profits but with the aim of giving people the chance to think creatively, work collaboratively, and lift themselves out of the poverty that had been imposed for generations.

Perhaps what is so remarkable about Grameen is that by any standard, conventional or unconventional, its prophetic vision has paid off. At the writing of this sermon, Muhammad Yunus' Grameen bank has given loans to nearly 7 million poor people, 97 percent of whom are women. The total amount of money lent to the poor now stands at about 6 billion U.S. dollars...and the repayment rate is an unimaginable 99 percent. In fact, Muhammad's initial vision has unfolded in newer and different ways as its borrowers-cum-owners have continued to imagine its potential. Grameen now provides

⁶ Yunus and Jolis, *Banker to the Poor*, p. 70.

loan insurance, money for higher education, technological access through village mobile phones, and soon, it hopes, internet access. “Change the structures as we are doing in Bangladesh,” Muhammad preaches over and over, “and you will see that the poor can change their own lives.”⁷ Of course, such changes don’t only benefit the poor. They offer the possibility of transformation for all of us who feel confined by the categories we have created.

“Come, let us reach an understanding,”
—says the LORD.

“Be your sins like crimson,
They can turn snow-white;
Be they red as dyed wool,
They can become like fleece.”
If, then, you agree and give heed,
You will eat the good things of the earth;
But if you refuse and disobey,
You will be devoured [by] the sword. —

When Muhammad went to Oslo last December to offer the Nobel lecture after he and the Grameen Bank won the Nobel Peace Prize, he didn’t go alone. In prophetic style, he brought nine proud women from the villages of Bangladesh. He began his address by raising the voices of thousands more, noting that what excited him most were the countless phone calls he had received from rural Bangladeshis delighting in *their* award. “This year’s prize,” Muhammad said, “gives highest honour and dignity to the hundreds of millions of women all around the world who struggle every day to make a living and bring hope for a better life for their children. This is a historic moment for them.”⁸ Then he went on to speak very eloquently of his own prophetic dream—the dream of a world where poverty existed only in museums, a world where we can tell our children what we

⁷ Yunus and Jolis, *Banker to the Poor*, p. 205.

⁸ The Nobel lecture, December 10, 2006.

did to address it, a world where we join in new partnerships that value every human life and the creative potential in every person.

Muhammad's prophetic call was the same called shared by those of many times and traditions, including our own. It was the call of the Hebrew prophets who sang that we are to treat each other with mercy. It was the call of the rabbi who taught that to love God is the same as loving our neighbor. It was call of the Qur'an that all our relations be governed by fairness and equity. It was the call of the Buddha who saw that there were no categories, only interconnections. It was the call of anyone, maybe the call of everyone who has ever, even for a moment, seen through all of the false divisions we have created to what is still possible...when we finally learn to give ourselves, our sisters and our brothers, a little credit...and begin working for the world we want.

In the name of peace. May it be so.