

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WHO ARE THE POOR?


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because he has anointed me to preach  
good news to the poor." Luke 4:18*

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THE RIVERSIDE  
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In the play, "A Man For All Seasons" Cardinal Wolsey turns to the unpurchasable Thomas More and shouts in despair, "If only you could see things flat without a moral squint." When a person comes to terms with God he loses the capacity to "see things flat without a moral squint." The conscience becomes sensitized, compassion is enlarged, care is extended, and love finds another outlet in a suffering world.

To come to terms with the God revealed in Scripture is to develop a concern for the poor. To the believer poverty is not merely economic or political, it is a matter of morality as well. In Old Testament law the people of God were given explicit instructions on how the poor should be dealt with in the Hebrew Commonwealth. One prophet after another rose up to warn against the neglect of the impoverished. Typical is Isaiah's cry, "What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor?" (Isa. 3:15)

Mary, in her Magnificat, uttered as she carried the babe in her womb, testified to a God who "exalted them of low degree -- who has filled the empty with good things and the rich sent empty away. (Lk 1:52)

According to St. Luke, the first words spoken by Jesus at the commencement of His ministry were a direct quotation from II Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor."

The Greek word for "poor" appears some thirty-five times in the New Testament. Twenty of these occur in the Synoptic gospels alone. Jesus went so far as to say that a ministry to the needy was a ministry

to Him: "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me." (Mat. 25:40)

To come to terms with God is to develop a concern for the poor. But who are the poor? Poverty wears a variety of faces. How shall we discern it?

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Who are the poor? They are those who lack the primary furnishings of life -- food, clothing and shelter. To depict poverty is to draw hollow faces, swollen stomachs and stillborn hopes. Rather than cast about for theological justification for our plenty we might better give attention to the harsh inequities that mark life on this planet now.

We have a way of not listening to the unpleasant. Noise has been defined as "unwanted sound." We tend to treat as noise the cries of the needy that rise up over all the earth. How hard it is to watch a televised series on India! How easy it is to believe that a tankful of gas for our cars is more important than a stomachful of food for a starving child in Java!

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The dimensions of poverty on a world scale are ominous. One-third to one-half the people on this earth suffer from nutritional deficiency. 60% of the world's pre-school children are inadequately nourished. Here in these United States we spend some \$375 a year per citizen for current military purposes and \$6 a year per citizen for economic assistance to impoverished countries. Our Department of Defense spends 215 million dollars a day for military needs -- real or imagined. Put differently, every fourteen hours the Department of Defense outspends the entire annual budget of the United Nations World Food Program!

The United States comprises some 5 1/2% of the world's population. Yet, we have 35% of the world's income. The United States, coupled with Europe, rep-

resents 20% of the world's population. Yet, Europe and the United States bring in 80% of the world's income.

Just this past week Maurice Strong, executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, observed that 200 million Americans use more energy for air-conditioning alone than China's population of 700 million use for all purposes. Mr. Strong went on to comment: "I believe it is highly questionable whether any country has a permanent right to a disproportionate share of the world's resources." 1

The energy crisis may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. It may help us Americans to think of life's resources on a global scale. The ability to buy does not carry with it the right to buy. Wealth is not an unrestricted permit to extract the riches of the earth for personal use. The fact of scarcity puts distribution and consumption under a different ethical light.

Some fifteen summers ago we vacationed on Shelter Island. While we were there a violent hurricane struck. I shall always remember how trees with the girth of centuries were snapped at the base like so many pieces of crisp celery. Power lines were down all over the island. Life was stalled.

Under these circumstances candles took on a new importance. There was a general store near us. When morning broke I made my way to that store only to discover a long line of people there before me. The rule of the day was "only two candles per house." It didn't matter how much money a person had, how big his yacht was anchored there in the basin, whether he had driven to the store in a Cadillac or a Volkswagen. No one had the right to pull out a \$20 bill and say "Give me a hundred of them." The fact of scarcity puts distribution and consumption in a different ethical light.

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Many efforts are required on a wide variety of fronts if we are to respond constructively to the statistics just given and the facts they represent. For one thing, there is need to work for population control and against whatever theological or cultural resistance is arrayed against it.

There is need to put pressure on our government to revise its international spending habits. We must think more in terms of balances of trade that favor developing nations rather than balances of trade that favor us. The New Priorities Movement that was born and developed in this church, and has now gone national, is committed to a more humane national budget -- less for hardware and more for people.

There is room also, large room, for personal action. We speak frequently in this church about the work of Cesar Chavez. It is through Mr. Chavez that one aspect of world poverty comes to our attention. He has need for funds, need for bodies, need for people with enough compassion and self-discipline to forego grapes and lettuce until growers come to terms with the National Farm Workers' Union.

I don't know where the idea came from for "Alternative Christmases," but it strikes me as a God-inspired concept. Here on the last Sunday before Advent one can almost hear the motors of our various department stores revving up for the kill. In fact, the largest department store chain in this country claimed recently that even in the face of the current energy crisis it could not shrink its operating week because reduced store hours would not permit the American buying public to get all of its purchasing done! The Christmases that we have known over the years have been consumer oriented.

The suggestion, coming from many places, is that we think of alternative Christmases. Give some of the funds that we would otherwise spend on needless presents to causes like the Ecumenical Ministry in Appalachia or the Mississippi Delta, CARE, the World Hunger



Foundation, the Salvation Army, or some of our denominational agencies that have ongoing ministries to the poorest of the earth.

I've got it all worked out for you. Take that check for \$10, \$15, \$20, or \$25 (think of all the subway tokens you will save and the frayed nerves you will spare yourself) and jot a little note like this:

"Dear Uncle Charles:

We have made a contribution in your name to \_\_\_\_\_ in the interest of helping the poor come up."

Love,

Why not? The world cannot go on indefinitely half flourishing and half destitute. It is not only good Christianity, but good sense as well, to work for a more equitable distribution of wealth and the means by which it is produced.

\* \* \*

Who are the poor? They are the strapped middle income families in our society who have a hard time saying no. The condition of which I speak is frequently described as "secondary poverty." On an objective scale secondary poverty does not rank with destitution. Subjectively, however, it can hurt and hurt plenty. I think Seneca must have had such poverty in mind when he said, "It is not the man who has too little but the man who craves more, that is poor." 2

The components of secondary poverty are an insatiable appetite for more and a hampering inability to resist seductive advertising. It appears that those who are so afflicted have a deep psychological need to establish who and where they are by means of visible status symbols.

I was pleasantly surprised the other day to listen to Joe Paterno, the successful head coach at Penn State University, explain why he turned down a million

dollar contract to coach a professional team. It came down to a matter of values. Money isn't the only thing towards which one ought to work.

The ads would have us believe that all the living must be going on somewhere else. I must be "out of it" unless I'm hopping a plane for Bermuda, or driving a sleek new car, or draping my bones with the latest Parisian fashions. To walk through the grass, or drink coffee with a friend, or watch a play is really nothing.

The classic name for this affliction is cupidity. We heard recently about a number of people here in the metropolitan area who were victimized by pyramid sales schemes. I found it hard to generate pity. All of the, without exception, were guilty of rank cupidity. Secondary poverty numbers its clients in the tens of thousands in this country. People in this classification are not poor by objective standards, but they already have the next raise both anticipated and spent!

We suffer from a common national ailment called the glut of accumulation. I used to visit once a month an elderly lady in one of the churches I served who was a recluse. She was unable to separate herself from anything -- string, paper, magazines, whatever. Over the course of eight years I found it harder and harder to get a chair when I went to see her! She was gradually being crowded out of her own quarters by those vast and meaningless accumulations.

The answer here is to ease up, cut back, and simplify. No one is better qualified to help us with this answer than John Woolman, that remarkable Quaker who dates back to the 18th Century. This saintly soul was effective in establishing Quaker "meeting-houses" in these parts. To pay expenses he sold dry goods. Because he was honest and dependable his business grew and grew. Commenting on this situation he wrote: "The road to large business appeared open but I felt a Stop! in my mind.... The increase of business became my burden; though my natural inclination was toward merchandise yet I believed that Truth required me to live



more free from outward Cumbers. And there was now a strife in my mind between the two."

Blessed John Woolman made this concern a matter of prayer. This was his conclusion: "Then I lessened my outward business; and, as I had opportunity, told my customers of my intention, that they might consider what shop to turn to." 3

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Who are the poor? They are those who have reached the top and found it empty. These are the poor who receive less sympathy than any. I call them the "upper poor." In recent months a new term has slipped into my vocabulary, "promotion anxiety." Promotion anxiety is a mood that attacks us at the point where we get what we wanted for a long time and find it disillusioning. Ah, the pity of it -- to buck for a promotion, get it and find it empty, to buck for more income, get it and find it meaningless. Promotion anxiety -- where the self remains basically unfulfilled despite the fact that all of its needs and most of its fancies are met. In such a fix one frequently looks around for another trifle to magnify.

At times in my mind's eye I can see an enormous number of people marching up toward a mountain top that they have not fully understood. With a light in their eye and hope in their heart they march with great determination. Some of them even sacrifice friends and family to make the climb. Even as they press upward another column can be found coming down from that mountain looking disillusioned, empty and frustrated. They've already been where the others are trying to get and found it wanting!

Awhile ago a publication associated with the fashion world came up with advice on what is "in" and what is "out" in party food this season. Beef Wellington, T-bone, Porterhouse and Sirloin steaks, prime ribs of beef and a host of other entrees are definitely out this season. Said this piece of social intelligence,

"To serve chicken with green pepper would be like wearing last year's gown." 4 I suggest that juxtaposed with the stark facts of world hunger, that sentiment and those who take it seriously are sicker than sick.

This is more of a spiritual poverty, true. It is interesting that conservatives -- political and economic -- are more concerned about poverty of soul, while liberals tend to be more concerned about poverty of body. But the Scriptures give equal treatment to both. Each excites God's pity. Liberation Theology is wrong when it suggests that God is in league with the poor in a common hatred of the rich. God loves everyone, even those who are well-off. It's just that He has a hard time getting through to them. Isn't it so?

The "upper poor" have been anticipated for us in the church at Laodicea: "For you say I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked."

(Rev. 3:17)

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"The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor." The gospel has good news -- not just for one kind of poor but any kind. To those who are destitute it says, "God is for you. His judgments are against oppression. Shake off your victim image. Gather your strength and your power and move. Equality belongs to the final vision." "Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill be made low."

To those who are caught in the painful trap of secondary poverty and the mad race for status and acceptance, the good news is that you don't have to scramble for rank. God loves you! Is it not enough that you are sons and daughters of the king?

And to the upper poor, those who have it all yet feel that they have nothing, the invitation is still out: "Sell what you have, give to the poor and come and follow him." Divest yourself of that which holds

you down and join in the liberating venture of faith. Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I say to you it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished saying, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With God all things are possible." (Mk 10:27)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*God, renew our vision of an earth at  
peace with itself and Thee; and help  
us to work and pray against the  
injustices that keep that vision  
unfulfilled.*

*Where our pleasures have come at the cost  
of another's pain -- forgive;  
And lead us to a simpler, fuller life.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. "The New York Times," November 22, 1973
2. Stevenson, Burton, The Home Book of Quotations, p. 1565, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York 1943
3. Woolman, John, The Journal With Other Writings of John Woolman, p. 47, J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., New York, 1910
4. "The New York Times," November 5, 1973, Column by John L. Hess

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