

Peace Sunday, November 6, 2005

# The Gate and The Gulf



***“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.”***

—Nelson Mandela

## The Gulf and the Poor

The Gulf was recently hit by one of the most devastating hurricanes in U.S. history. The victims were predominantly from what Jonathan Alter, in *Newsweek*, called “the Other America,” economically depressed communities of low income African-Americans. And this time no one could blame the poor for their plight, which is often the practice of those who are economically secure. The illusion that most citizens of New Orleans could just get in their SUVs, head out of town, and stay in a nice hotel was shattered like glass in the harsh winds of economic truth. The hurricane exposed the gulf that exists between the haves and the have-nots.

Hurricane Katrina blew back the curtain that hides the stark reality of poverty from public view. It also revealed the widening gulf that exists between the haves and the have-nots. Senator Barack Obama said on the floor of the Senate, “I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane. They were abandoned long ago--to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.”

The gap between the rich and poor is not getting any better. Even with the decade-long rising tide of economic growth, not all boats rise. The number of people living below the poverty line (\$14,680 for a family of three) is at 37 million (12% of the population), up 1 million from last year. As I write this material Congress is getting ready to consider how much to cut from health care, food assistance, and other vital programs to the poor and working families and how much in the way of taxes (up to \$70 billion) can be cut for the richest people in America. And the gulf ever widens.

What does our faith say to the widening gulf between the rich and the poor?

## The Rich Man, the Poor Man, and the Gate

Poverty is a key motif in the gospel of Luke and Acts. Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is a pointed story about the gulf between the rich and the poor. Although it is framed as a story about the afterlife, the setting is primarily a backdrop for contrasting the economic inequities in the agrarian peasant society of ancient Israel/Palestine. The Rich Man is part of the urban elite class, which controls the wealth, power, and privilege. His lifestyle is lavish. He is depicted as wearing expensive, imported purple cloth and daily reclining at a lavish feast. By contrast, poor, hungry Lazarus, whose name ironically means "helped by God," is a destitute beggar clothed in running sores as he lies begging at the Rich Man's gate. Like other destitute people of the time, he may have lost what money he had upon foreclosure of a mortgage by wealthy landowners, who sucked up his small plot of land. Lazarus has "hit the skids."

The Rich Man wipes his hands on bread as napkins and tosses them under his table for the wild dogs. The dogs taste Lazarus just outside the dividing gate. Although the gate separating the Rich Man and Lazarus may only keep them apart by feet, it serves as a boundary marker symbolizing the wide gulf that exists between the rich and poor.

The death of the Rich Man and Lazarus reveals an eschatological "turn of the tables." Lazarus is in "Abraham's bosom," a place of blessing, and the Rich Man is in Hades, a place of cursing. The fortunes of the two have been reversed. Now, the Rich Man, accustomed to ordering others around, orders Abraham to send Lazarus with just a drop of water to cool his fevered brow. But a wide, permanent chasm separates them. In life, the gulf was not yet fixed; it was marked by a gate, a gate that could have been opened at any time. But, now it is too late and the gulf that divides them cannot be bridged.

The Rich Man becomes the beggar as he pleads with Abraham to send someone to his house to warn his five brothers, so they don't have to sweat it out in Hades. Abraham reminds him that they already have "Moses and the prophets," the testimony of God's covenant. But it appears that though the Rich Man and his family may have "read their Bibles," they did not read them in such a way that it transformed how they responded to the poor right on the other side of their gate. They did not read the Bible as an economic manifesto or take the opportunities right at their door, or should I say "gate," to respond to the poor in their midst. May God give us the grace to heed the words of Moses and the prophets and Jesus and reach across the gate and the gulf, while we have ever-present opportunities.

## Sermon Ideas

- **The Great Divide**—Explore the ethical issue of the economic gap between the rich and the poor. Draw parallels between Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and contemporary race and class divisions in the United States. Resource: Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, San Francisco: Harper, 2005, chapters 13-14.
- **Blessed are the Poor/Woe to the Rich**—Do a topical sermon on what the Bible has to say about wealth and poverty. Resource: Ronald J. Sider, *Cry Justice: The Bible Speaks on Hunger and Poverty* Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980.
- **God of the Poor**—Preach on the theological theme of the God of the poor (Job 5:11-16). Resource: Victorio Araya, *God of the Poor*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988.

## Service

### Gathering Music

"Another Day in Paradise," Phil Collins, Album: "... But Seriously," Atlantic Records, 1989.

### Call to Worship

Blessed are you who are poor,  
*for yours is the kingdom of God.*  
Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
*for you will be filled.*  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
*for you will laugh.*  
Woe to you who are rich,  
*for you have received your consolation.*  
Woe to you who are full now,  
*for you will be hungry.*  
Woe to you who are laughing now,  
*for you will mourn and weep.*  
(Luke 6:20-26)

### Invocation

Make us worthy, Lord,  
to serve others throughout the world  
who live and die  
in poverty and hunger.  
Give them, through our hands, this day their daily bread,  
and by our understanding love,  
give peace and joy.

—Mother Theresa (from Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, *Life Prayers*, Harper San Francisco, p. 116)

### Praise Hymns

- *Here in this place*, No. 6, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, Scottdale: Mennonite Pub. House, 1992.

- *Somos pueblo que camino* (We are people on a journey), No. 8, *Sing the Journey*, Faith and Life Resources, 2005.

## Call to Confession

God has provided for the needs of all humanity through sun and rain, planting and harvest, home and family, work and rest. And yet we have sought to accumulate and fill our lives with things that do not satisfy. Our material wealth and consumption of resources have come at the expense of the poor in the world. Jesus calls us to a different lifestyle. The truth is, Jesus had more to say about economics, than about sex or right doctrine. But we have not heeded his many warnings about wealth and must confess our complicity in creating the gulf between the rich and the poor. We come before God in confession.

## Prayer of Confession

In Jamaica, we are poor.  
 Sometimes I wake up in the morning,  
 And there is only tea in the house.  
 I get down on my knees and say,  
 “Thank you, God, for the tea.”  
 In America, you have so many things.  
 Yet I am confused:  
 I see so much around me, in your country,  
 But I don’t see your people saying,  
 “Thank you, God.”

*(This poem was taken from a sermon that George Simpson, a Jamaican migrant worker, preached at Bethany Church, Randolph, Vermont, 1989, Cited in Maren C Tirabasi and Kathy Wonson Eddy, Gifts of Many Cultures Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995, pg.13.)*

## Corporate Confession

We must confess, O God, that we, European Americans, are the rich of the world. The abundance of the earth is at our tables. And we have built bigger spaces to store all our stuff. Forgive us for not being grateful for what we have and for seeking to have more than we need. Show us how to be content. Give us your Spirit to resist the powers that keep rich and poor divided until that day when the gulf that divides us all shall finally be bridged. Amen.

## Words of Assurance (Unison)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us  
 because God has anointed us  
 to bring good news to the poor  
 God has sent us to proclaim release  
 to the captives  
 and recovery of sight to the blind,  
 to let the oppressed go free,  
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

*(adapted from Isaiah 61:1-2a/Luke 4:18-19)*

## The Word from the First Testament—Psalm 146

## The Word from the Second Testament—Luke 16:19-31

## Theme Hymns

- *Where cross the crowded ways*, No. 405, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*
- *Cuando el pobre* (When the poor ones), No. 69, *Sing the Journey*.

## The Word for Today

Read the story of Carolina Maria de Jesus in Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, p. 8

## The Word Proclaimed—Sermon

### Offering Litany

Christ, who stands in the food line at the local soup kitchen:

***Give us eyes to see you.***

Christ, who sleeps on the park bench in raggedy clothes:

***Give us hands to reach out to you.***

Christ, who waits for hours in the free clinic with no health care insurance:

***Give us hearts to feel with you.***

Christ, who peers through the bars of a county prison cell:

***Give us feet to visit you.***

Christ of the poor, when did we care for you?

***When you cared for the least of these my brothers and sisters.***

*(based on Matthew 25:31-46)*

### Offering Hymns

- *Heart and mind, possessions*, Lord No. 392, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*
- *Lord of all good*, No.60, *Sing the Journey*

## Prayer of Blessing

Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

Blessed are those who have given expecting nothing in return.

Blessed are those who have given out of their abundance and out of little.

Blessed are those who have given sharing with those in need.

Blessed are those who have given loving the act of giving.

Blessed are those who have given loving the one in whose name they give.

Blessed are those who have given with thanksgiving in their hearts. Amen.

## Sending

Here in this place we have heard the voice of God.

***Here in this place we have been challenged by Jesus.***

Here in this place we have been moved by the Spirit.

***Here in this place God has bridged the gulf that divides.***

Rich from poor, male from female,

***black from white, old from young.***

We go from this place with a new vision for life.

***We go from this place to live out that vision.***

We go from this place to live by the Spirit's truth.

***We go from this place to live by God's coming reign.***

## Benediction Hymns

- *I bind my heart this tide*, No. 411, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*
- *Let justice flow like streams*, No. 65, *Singing the Journey*

## Benediction

Remember the words of Jesus, "You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish."

(from Mark 14:7)

## Action Ideas

- **Get your congregation involved in the ONE campaign of Bread for the World** (<http://www.bread.org/>). The ONE campaign is an effort to address AIDS and extreme poverty. Organize a ONE Sunday and write letters to your congressional representatives on key resolutions.
- **Learn to live on less.** Form a support group for living a simpler life from your congregation or in the community. Resources: Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980; [www.simpleliving.org](http://www.simpleliving.org).
- **Take the Katrina Pledge to get involved** in helping the victims of the hurricane and to work at bridging the gulf between the rich and the poor by changing our nation's priorities. Resource: Call to Renewal, <http://www.go-sojo.net/campaign/katrinapledge>.

## Children's Ideas

- **Calvary Chapel has several pages of coloring, puzzles, fill in the blanks, word find, and maze on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus for children.** <http://www.calvarychapel.org/children/site/pdf/New/Curr211.pdf>
- **Enlist youth to dress in appropriate attire for the Rich Man and Lazarus**, and don't forget the dogs, to pantomime the story as it is read to children during the children's time in worship. Create simple props, such as a gate, table, etc.

Play refrain of "Who Let the Dogs Out!" by Baja Men when the dogs approach Lazarus.

- **Share the children's story, *Bone Button Borscht***, by Aubrey Davis, illustrations by Dusan Petricic. Based on the classic French tale, *Stone Soup*, this is the story of a ragged beggar who arrives in a town in hopes of finding some food. When he is refused by the townspeople, who insist they are too poor to help a stranger, he promises he'll cook up a "miracle" borscht made of buttons. As the townspeople begin to get excited about the miracle borscht and start to contribute some of their own food, they learn the joy of sharing. Davis' entertaining interpretation and Petricic's subtle watercolors succeed in showing the beautiful transformation of a cold uncaring town into a wonderful community by a heroic beggar who believes his begging brings out the good in people (Kid Can Press, 1995). For other stories, see <http://www.4children.org/news/500books.htm>.

## Resources

- Victorio Araya, *God of the Poor*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002.
- William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, New York: Crown Pubs., 1995.
- Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980.
- MCC Washington Office Guide to Poverty in the United States*, [http://www.mcc.org/us/washington/poverty\\_guide.pdf](http://www.mcc.org/us/washington/poverty_guide.pdf) (Find other resources on economic globalization at <http://www.mcc.org/us/globalization/resources.html>)
- Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989.
- Ronald J. Sider, *Cry Justice: The Bible Speaks on Hunger and Poverty*, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980.
- Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Dallas: Word, 1997.
- Paul L. Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence*, Philadelphia: New Society Pubs., 1989.
- Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, San Francisco: Harper, 2005.
- Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America*, Philadelphia: Free Press, 1994.



Peace Sunday material was written by Leo Hartshorn, Minister of Peace and Justice, Mennonite Mission Network and designed by Cynthia Friesen Coyle, Peace and Justice Support Network volunteer. For peace and justice resources and to join the network go to: [www.mennoniteusa.org/peace](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/peace). For more information about PJSN or to offer your responses to the Peace Sunday material contact: Leo Hartshorn, Mennonite Mission Network, 202 South Ann Street, Lancaster, Pa, 17602, 717-399-8353, [LeoH@MennoniteMission.net](mailto:LeoH@MennoniteMission.net). **Your financial gifts are crucial for continuing to strengthen the vision of peace and justice in Mennonite Church USA. Thanks for your support.**