

Good News to the Poor

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Once a woman entered the office of a First Presbyterian Church. Everyone was frantically attempting to meet bulletin and newsletter deadlines, answer the phone, and generally attend to the business of the church. She looked out of place with her shabby clothing, unkempt hair, dirty complexion, and heavy lines on her face. She wanted to talk with the pastor. "Which one?" the secretary snapped back. It was obvious she was in the way. When she did not answer immediately, the secretary said she would try to find one. The woman sat quietly out of the way.

In a few minutes a minister came who ushered her into his office and listened to her story. It was not very different from hundreds of others he had heard, and it reminded him of the sermon he was working on—his text was "Dives and Lazarus," and his title, which he hoped to fit to the text, was "Love's Inevitable Expression." The sermon was full of good Barthian theology, but like the woman's story, it had no originality. Her husband had left her with three small children, and she was working as a maid whenever a neighbor could keep the children. This month had been bad with two of the children sick and her welfare check was late. She was not a beggar. In fact her family had always been self-supporting, but now she needed help.

The pastor explained that funds were limited and this had been a hard month for several people. But he could probably give her \$15 to help out. Of course, he would have to run a check with EEA (Ecumenical Emergency Assistance) to make sure she was not making the rounds. He did so quickly, anxious to get back to that sermon on love before his train of thought was completely broken. The thought process had been exhilarating before the interruption. This sermon would make abstract love concrete. As he was writing the check he looked at the poor woman. She was smiling at him. "What's on your mind?" he asked as he filled in the stub. "You really don't have a choice about helping me, do you?" she asked. "I mean, seeing as how you are a preacher."

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"You got no choice but to help me 'cause Jesus has a special place in his heart for us poor folks," she responded.

"I guess you are right," he replied as he left the desk to give her the check and usher her out of the office.

The preacher got back to the sermon, but he could not concentrate. The words of that poor woman kept running through his mind: "You got no choice but to help me 'cause Jesus has a special place in his heart for us poor folks." The Bible clearly did say Jesus was "despised and rejected."

He knew she was right as he returned to his sermon. He began to thumb through the concordance for help on the subject. These passages were listed:

"The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed." Psalm 103:6

“Blessed is the one who considers the poor!” Psalm 41:1

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse . . . and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him . . . with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” Isaiah 11:1

“Blessed are the poor; for yours is the kingdom of God.” Luke 6:20

But then a question entered his mind: who are the poor about whom Jesus was concerned? He found some helpful words from Gunther Bornkamm: “The poor and they that mourn are those who have nothing to expect from the world, but who expect everything from God. They look towards God, and also cast themselves upon God; in their lives and in their attitudes they are beggars before God . . . the poor who do not fit into the structure of the world and therefore are rejected by the world.” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p.76) The woman who came into his office definitely fit that category—and so did Jesus. The preacher thought how easy it was for him and his congregation to recognize how they all needed God’s help, how they were obliged to “expect everything from God” because they were unable to sustain their lives. Galloping inflation was about to destroy their budgets; the competition was fierce; and the changing roles, particularly among women, were threatening. They all knew their lives were dependent on God. But when the list was extended to include welfare mothers, young blacks, and others who were standing in need—then they could not identify so easily with Jesus’ words.

The record, however, was convincing and the poor woman was right—the God of the Bible has a bias toward the poor. The preacher went back to check the authorities. Karl Barth had said: “God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.”

The preacher returned to his text and sought to focus more sharply on it. The familiar story had two main characters: Dives and Lazarus. Dives was a rich man, “clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” The minister wondered who were the contemporary rich folks and immediately envisioned a person successful in business, law, or medicine. It would probably be a Presbyterian making a large salary, living in a huge home, maintaining a summer place, driving a big car, enjoying gourmet food and fine restaurants, knowing the difference between Beeteaters’, Gordon’s or Gilby’s gin, and belonging to a private club or two. “Lord I thank you that I am not like one of them,” was the preacher’s silent prayer. But wasn’t that the image of success in his culture? He had himself worked for all those things secretly. The doctor had advised him to lose some weight; he needed a raise simply to keep up with the cost of living; and he had just bought a Botany 500 suit so he could look like a successful executive. He was in the 8% who used 40% of the world’s resources. He was not rich; he only wanted some security.

The rich man in Luke’s parable was obviously generous. He would pull out his check book for a good charity in a minute, and he contributed heavily to the church budget. This much was obvious because the poor stood outside his gate desiring to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. The word had gotten around that Dives would drop a bill occasionally. But while Dives was fathomable, Lazarus was more difficult to bring into focus. The preacher had been to school with the Diveses of this world and eaten at their tables, but the Lazaruses

were only statistics and invisible to his naked eye. They never came to the Presbyterian church. Many of them were young and black in the urban ghetto where no "successful" churches were found. The preacher had read an interesting statistic. In his state a welfare mother with three children was expected to live on \$141 a month including food, shelter, clothing, utilities, medical expenses, and miscellaneous. It sounded a little low to him. Someone said it was the lowest in the nation. In fact it was less than his *mortgage* payment each month.

Lazarus must be a marginal person, one of those folks you see standing idly on the street corner when you stop for a red light, or one of those in line at the grocery store with food stamps. He is an embarrassment to a culture that worships affluence. Only once had the preacher been poor—relatively speaking of course! It was during seminary, and then he and his wife were never hungry and had, in fact, been quiet happy with their simpler lifestyle. They were able to load all their possessions in a Volkswagen. On the last move it took a huge moving van. They had often commented that their possessions were awesome. At any rate, the preacher recognized that most of the time he was not aware Lazarus was there. But occasionally he heard of thefts or other acts that threatened the order of things. Then he thought of Lazarus who otherwise was invisible—except at Thanksgiving and Christmas when he became the object of seasonal charity.

Of course the preacher knew there was a difference between welfare and charity. A recent survey which the preacher had clipped was headlined: "Poll Shows Public Favors Welfare: Hates Concept." The survey found that the very word "welfare" seemed to raise a kind of red flag before the public. But once the word was set aside, Americans displayed a deep compassion for those who were destitute and helpless. The preacher had the feeling that if he could introduce Dives to Lazarus at a church supper, the beggar at the gate might become more real. How could he get people beyond this "hangup" with a concept so good news could be preached to the poor in Jesus' name? When would it be realized that the personal concern must be translated into systematic change to remove Lazarus from the invisible status? Soon it might be too late. For of late Lazarus had not been willing to sit quietly at the gate. He had been raising his voice and becoming pushy to get a fair share of the pie. Even more disturbing, the Bible had been used as the basis of his protest, one made in the name of the Lord. The preacher went to the Bible dictionary. It said: "Lazarus means 'God helps.'" So Lazarus would no longer wait in silence for the garbage from affluent tables. It dawned on the preacher that good news to the poor meant adjustment for the rich.

The story went on to affirm that God was on the side of poor Lazarus. The preacher was uncomfortable because after both had died Dives had a funeral fitting his status and wealth, while Lazarus still had nothing. But Jesus' tale described a dramatic shift thereafter: Lazarus was in heaven and Dives was in hell. And Dives' insensitivity to Lazarus had been the criteria for judgment. Surely, thought the preacher, Lazarus deserved a break. But why was Dives' judged so harshly by a loving and forgiving God? These questions bothered him because he was not sure where he fit, being neither rich nor poor. Maybe . . . he was one of the brothers and sisters to whom Lazarus wanted to speak about the way God looked at things. He pulled out a sermon by a favorite preacher, Edmund Steimle, who shed some light on the great reversal in the parable:

What Jesus is doing, of course, in this trip to hell and back is not to lay down a theology of the after life or to discuss the question whether universal salvation is a possibility or not; that's not his point. The point is to show us by these stark contrasts what's really going on in life here. The great gulf fixed is one of our own digging here and now. And as we dig it and defend it and rationalize it and justify it—even from the Bible at times for is it not written that “the poor you have with you always”—we are in fact destroying one of the fundamental facts of creation. For from the very beginning we are created to become involved, to live in relationship to each other in a community of mutual concern—one human family. We are created to be dependent upon one another or, as Robert Frost says somewhere, “love and need are one.”

Jesus apparently, thinks it necessary to take us to hell and back to see what a hell we can make of life here and now, a hell that is inexorable, “eternal” in the sense of being ultimate—so long as we deny our basic humanity by failing to identify with the brothers and sisters in need.

He was reminded of some words by a Christian brother from Latin America who has pleaded the cause of the poor and poorless in his country. Don Helder Camara had raised the right question:

Have you noticed who bury their talents?
Not just the person with only one,
but people given five or ten,
instead of reaping double,
become comfortable,
falsely cautious,
falsely humble,
and at harvest home return in empty handed barrenness. . . .
Don't call them yet to account.
Wait a moment,
Let me go out
to my brothers and sisters,
try to rouse them by my cry. . . .

Maybe this was the point—to be awakened to the hell of human construction. Where were the concerns of the poor on his church's agenda? It was the next question the preacher could not avoid. His church had just gone into a million dollar building program, already having spent several hundred thousand dollars for an organ. It would certainly enhance the aesthetics of their worship, but what about Lazarus at the door? He remembered a drawing by Robert Hodgell he had seen in another minister's study depicting a preacher in his clerical garb carrying a replica of a huge church in his arms. Beside him a beggar was asking for some help. The anguished look on the pastor's face reflected his inability to help because of his heavy load. He remembered the lines of a favorite hymn: “Rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom grant us courage for the living of these days.” He recalled a rich congregation in another city which had voted to defer a building of a million dollar sanctuary in favor of providing food for the hungry. It was a courageous act. That pastor had said the officers could not in good conscience vote to build when they knew two thirds of the human family goes to bed hungry every night. But surely giving away food could

not be the answer. Then the pastor was reminded of another church which had given several hundred thousand dollars to a project in a poor country to develop better agricultural methods and to provide better health care. At last report the gift had been making a difference to those who received and to those who gave.

Where could he begin with his congregation? Perhaps he could prompt them to listen to the cries of their brothers and sisters in need and provide a forum in which these voices might be heard. A fellow Presbyterian in the state legislature had drawn a blank when he was asked about the plight of the poor welfare mothers and children in their state! In a state where payments were the lowest in the nation, he had voted five times not to increase benefits. It was not a major concern of his constituents he said. Perhaps some education needed to go on about the plight of the poor so the church could speak to legislators on behalf of the poor. Lifestyle questions could be addressed. The preacher's mind was full of ideas, and they were more deeply etched by a quote from a new book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*:

Christians should be in the vanguard. The church of Jesus Christ is the most universal body in the world today. All we need to do is truly obey the One we rightly worship. But to obey will mean to follow. And he lives among the poor and oppressed, seeking justice for those in agony. If at this moment in history a few million Christians in affluent nations dare to join hands with the poor around the world, we will decisively influence the course of world history. Together we must strive to be a biblical people ready to follow wherever Scripture leads.

Suddenly he reversed in his mind the familiar lines: "Poor in things and rich in soul." Could it be that the hunger he and his congregation had felt for a closer relationship with God, a return to spirituality, was related to the needs of the poor? Prayer and Bible study were essential for his soul, but so was food for the hungry. Good news to the poor required food for body and soul. Listening to their brothers and sisters in need might remind his congregation of their deep needs which they could not meet alone no matter how wealthy they were. In the final analysis they all would appear before God with empty hands. Who of them could ever save their life? "The poor you will always have with you" might be a reminder of the status of each in the kingdom. They might be in touch with a mysticism far richer than they ever imagined: "I was hungry and you. . . ." They might meet their Lord when they were in touch with the human needs of their brothers and sisters. The preacher suddenly realized that it was the Spirit who compelled the preaching of the good news to the poor.

For a moment the preacher seemed to see it all fit together like a beautiful jigsaw puzzle—or had he blown a fuse? For heaven's sake, it was 12:11 and he was late for Kiwanis at the Hilton. Then to the hospitals. . . . It was such a beautiful day. . . . Hopefully there would be time for golf with Jim, a new elder and executive vice president at First National; or at least time to jog a couple of miles before a quick shower and supper followed by a rush back to the church to meet with the building committee regarding the new sanctuary. And of course he had to remember that phrase from Frost, "love and need are one," because it seemed to go with "Love's Inevitable Expression." As he reached to cut off the desk lamp his eyes caught the closing words:

If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should raise from the dead.