

Sermon 2.11.07

This morning I want to say something about caring for the poor, those folks who are named by Jesus as blessed. For sure, it's a Christian ethical imperative made clear by Jesus himself. He says so in Matthew 26. For sure, God has a preferential option for the poor. God's made that quite evident in the unfolding story of God's people. The Biblical record of the behavior of the Jews is striking in it's portrayal of how people treat the poor, whether they be Jews or otherwise. The prophets rail against those who would mistreat distressed neighbors. For sure, our present day church constantly encourages people to give to the poor, whether it be food, clothing, shelter, sympathy or friendship and understanding. At Salem, we're all familiar with our periodic food and clothing drives, our desire to help the needy at Thanksgiving and Christmas, our travel to Zionsville Meadows twice a month to provide worship with people there who can't travel to their own church. We know what it's like to reach into our pockets for extra money for a good cause, like supporting Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans with \$100 each quarter for a couple of years or contributing to Habitat For Humanity for housing builds in our own communities. There've been numerous other spontaneous appeals for money and help that we've generously contributed to over the years. We have a decent record for caring for the poor, and God is no doubt pleased with that.

What I want to focus on this morning, though, in our awareness of caring for the poor, isn't so much on what we give to them, nor on how much we actually help them out of, or through, their dilemma, but rather, on what happens to us spiritually as we make the decision to personally help. What spiritual thing is going on in our hearts in this whole process of giving to the poor? What can we say or learn about the presence of Christ in us while deciding how we'll help the poor? After all, they're many people who aren't in any fashion "Christian" who give greatly, perhaps much more, to helping out people in dire straits. It's not uncommon for public schools to have food and clothing drives. Rotary clubs and Kiwanis and The American Legion all care for the poor by making their members aware of, not only the needs of people, but the obligation to give generously. Christians are by no means the only caring/giving game in town.

I think we do well to reflect on how our relationship with Christ is faring, as we begin to pursue these charitable undertakings. They are, I think, exercises. They are exercises in Faith. They're meant to lead us to a greater knowledge of the love of God, made possible by Christ within us, and how we might be cutting off that love, or diminishing that love, or devaluing that love, so that we're not receiving the full benefit of what Christ has done for us, in his death and resurrection for us.

For many Sundays this fall and winter, we've heard appeals for food for The Sharing Place, a Lutheran ministry for the poor of Indianapolis. And many Sundays there's been food brought here to take. They are faithful servants, who bring and deliver this food Sunday after Sunday. But, some Sundays, there's no food. But, even if we brought food every Sunday, and delivered food every Sunday, that still doesn't even come close to meeting the hunger needs in our city, let alone the world. I remind us again, that UN statistics say that more than 22,000 people will die today of starvation. Whether we bring

canned goods to our church or not. The ELCA, for one, has an instructive book available on how to mobilize folk to eradicate hunger in the world. It's worth a read. And, I have a copy, if you'd like to read it. But, it's a long and difficult road to get to the point where everyone on the planet has enough food at their disposal each day to prevent diseases caused by malnutrition that in turn make them incapable of living productive and useful day-to-day lives. So, if our efforts to feed the poor are measured by how much of a dent we actually make in the situation of poverty, it's easy to be discouraged. The devil is not tired of trying.

But, by taking a look at the spiritual process of your giving to the poor, in other words, by observing what actually is going on in you that is transformed by the living God to be of value to the needy world, I believe you have much to gain. Take the simple act of buying some cans of soup. Is it on your mind to purchase a few cans for Sharing Place when you pick up your car keys to drive to the store? You might make it a practice to say a prayer that your intentions will be a blessing for someone else, and that your life be blessed, too.

Are you thankful to God for the safety in which you can drive to the store to make these purchases? Once you get there, as you survey the massive quantities of food stuffs available from which to choose, are you thankful to God for the bounty of God's earth that makes such largess possible? Pausing a moment to pray a prayer of thanksgiving in awe of God's creative prowess would be quite appropriate right then. Do you remember the workers who tended to that food while it was growing in the fields or picked from the trees? Do you think it possible that those very people might well be the ones who are the beneficiaries of the cans of stuff you're about to donate? They are God's children, too, and brothers and sisters with us on this planet.

As you divide out the food between the things that will go into your cupboards and the rest that will go into a sack or two, to be brought to our church on a Sunday, do you say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for blessing you with adequate food, such that you can even give some of it away? As you consider your daily nutritional needs for healthy living, are you aware of how much you're entitled to, as a human being with caloric needs, and how much you actually consume? Have you ever paused to consider that your excess, if there is one, belongs to someone else and you've stolen it from them?

All of this is to say that the focus of our giving is not the amounts we give, nor the percentages of our giving, nor even, at least for now, on those who're the recipients, but rather on our own spiritual lives. Jesus is looking right at us and saying to our faces, blessed are you who're poor, hungry, weeping, hated, abandoned, persecuted, and belittled. YOU are Blessed! It's as if to say that our spiritual exercises are designed to make us poor, and all the rest of those attributes Jesus calls blessed.

The seemingly simple act of bringing food to church for Sharing Place has far greater dimensions than us feeling good about our generosity helping somebody else. These acts are deep mines with rich veins of spirituality for you; rich ways to know the heart of God. In your prayers, that is, in your praying during these ordinary routines, you will find that God is dwelling in your heart.

Because I think our spiritual relationship with God tells more about us than the success or unsuccess of our giving to the poor, or pounds or tons of food given away, I invest a great deal of importance in the exercise of seeing how God is truly in our hearts. I think we'd be amazed to know how lavishly God is present, and how little of that available joy we have actually known and participated in. Perhaps we'll know more of God's love because we learn to give more. Perhaps we'll know God's blessings more as we learn to live more poorly, not in poverty, but poorly. But, in either case, we'll know more of loving God because we've participated in the world to which God has shown that love is the prime way to engage ourselves in it.