



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Oct 29, 2004

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

Editors Note: Beginning in November, the Update will be issued just twice a month instead of each week. The normal dates will be the first and third weekends of each month.

As I have been reflecting upon the upcoming election, I have become quite aware of a distinguishable pattern emanating from the respective political camps. At first this realization was just a small but insistent buzzing within my psyche, but as days have stretched into weeks and months it has become more of a roaring wind. There is something absolutely essential which is missing in action in this campaign, something which was much more central in past elections.

I frame this concern in a question: What has ever happened to the poor? Have they just gone away? Have they moved into the middle class? Has all of the policies of the government lifted all boats? Do we have no more poor, has poverty been eradicated? You might think so given this particular campaign.

I remember times when the poor were at the center of campaigns. Richard Nixon promised to give a guaranteed wage to all of the poor. Lyndon Johnson promised a war on poverty. Franklin Roosevelt promised an entire safety net for the poor. To be fair President Bush has instituted a program called "No Child Left Behind" which is designed to help poor kids. Senator Kerry talks about providing medical care for all children who are presently uninsured, which would include the poor.

But the emphasis this year is rather deliberately avoiding all mention of the poor. There is a debate about tax cuts, whether for the wealthy or for the middle class. I am sure everyone thinks they deserve a tax cut. However, there is almost no mention about the growing disparity between rich and poor. What has happened to the poor?

What about Christians? Are they advocating for the poor? After all, the Bible is rather clear and unambiguous about this issue, it consistently describes God as having a preference for the poor. You would think that the religious left and the religious right and the religious middle could join together in a comprehensible manner to eliminate poverty and hunger, as the Bible advocates. But we hear almost nothing about the poor.

Many key events in the Bible happen around the issues of wealth and poverty. The Exodus was all about setting free some of the poorest and most oppressed people in the world. God is quoted as saying, "I have seen the affliction of my people and heard their cry, I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them." God set the oppressed free, led them out of bondage and into the Promised Land.

Of course when they got to the Promised Land, huge disparity between rich and poor quickly was established. Some people became oppressors and others were the oppressed. God sends prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and Jeremiah to warn the people that such extremes would bring about destruction. Amos quotes an angry God who says, "I hate and despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies, away with the noise of your songs, I will not even listen to your music. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Justice means that everyone has enough and no one has too much.

When Mary is told she is going to be the mother of the Messiah, she sings the revolutionary song known as the Magnificat, *"My soul magnifies the Lord, He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty."*

Jesus goes on to pronounce a blessing on the poor and a curse on the rich. *"Blessed are the poor, for there is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who hunger now, for they will be satisfied. Woe to those who are rich, for they have already received their reward. Woe to those who are filled now, for they shall hunger."* (Luke 6:20-25).

When Jesus is asked to preach his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, he chooses the words from Isaiah 61, *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* Then Jesus closed the Bible and said, *"Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus always tells two powerful stories about rich and poor. One is the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and wants to follow. And Jesus says to him, *"Give away all that you have to the poor, and then come and follow me."* But the rich man could not do it, and it says he went away sorrowful. There was something about his wealth which was keeping him from being a disciple.

The other story is in Matthew 25, where Jesus even indicates that our salvation is connected to how we treat the poor. Jesus says to one group, *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."*

But the righteous don't remember when they did this for Jesus and so he says, *"Whatever you do for the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you do it for me."* Candidates should remember this, *"Whatever we do for the least of our sisters and brothers, the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts, we do it for Jesus Christ."*

Leviticus 25 is among the most radical chapters in the Bible. God is so upset with the way that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer that he cre-

ates a plan, a plan which is called the Jubilee Principle. Have you ever heard of Jubilee? It is not a sale at the mall.

The Jubilee is basically centered in one specific idea. Every fifty years people have to give it all back. Every fifty years people need to give back all of their property, possessions, wealth. And everyone starts over again on an equal playing field.

Of course God knew there is no such thing as an equal playing field. Some people just naturally have the gift of making money, of entrepreneurship, of accumulating wealth. Most likely it would happen all over again, although God was hopeful that this Jubilee would teach people that everything belongs to God, and that we are just stewards. But if great disparity happens again, then after fifty years you have to give it all back. There would be no opportunity for just a few to control most of the wealth.

Read about it in Leviticus 25. What an idea! However, guess who were the people who were responsible for implementing this principle? Of course, the powerful and the wealthy. They were not about to give it all back, in fact they always promoted policies to keep more of what they have. So it never happened. If we only took God seriously the whole world could be changed, no one would have too much and no one would have too little. Jubilee.

I had a favorite congressman some years ago, his name was Tony Hall. He said he had two basic priorities, he was pro-life and pro-poor. By pro-life he was against abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, violence and war. By pro-poor he believed God had a preference for the poor, he helped promote Bread for the World, he was a hunger fighter, he pushed for policies that would help the poor first. He was savaged by the Christian coalition on the right for being pro-poor and by the Christian left for being pro-life. I tend to think he was right on when it comes to Biblical interpretation.

So I keep waiting for someone to remember the poor. The God of the Scriptures always remember the poor, in fact advocated for the poor, loved them, saved them, set them free.

Wouldn't it be great if God's people followed God in doing the same?