

**Our Responsibility to the Poor**  
**Year C – Proper 21 – September 26, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

There is a story of an old widow who lived on the edge. She had just enough money to meet her expenses, most of the time. One day she opened her mail. It was a letter that read this: “Dear Madam: I wish to let you know that I will be coming for dinner this Sunday. I look forward to seeing you. Love, Jesus.” You can imagine the woman’s surprise and joy! She went to work cleaning her humble home. She cleared all the papers that were stacked on the dining room table. She dusted and swept the entire house clean. She set out her best china, chipped and worn, but pretty and filled with memories. When the widow went to the cupboard, all she had there was one can of chicken noodle soup and a half package of crackers.

She thought to herself that this would not do. She went through the whole house to find what little money she could. She scouted the neighborhood for returnable bottles. Finally, she had enough to buy a meager but decent meal. After Church, she hurried to the grocery store. Luck would have it that pot roast was on sale! She bought a small one along with some other food. Happy with her find, she left the store for the walk home.

As the widow passed a dark alley, a man stepped out of the shadows. He was old, and wore rags. A tattered hat covered his eyes. He smelled bad, of alcohol and tobacco. He wheezed as he moved towards the woman. She was frightened by his sudden appearance. “I’m hungry. Do you have any food I can have?” She hesitated. The meal she had just bought was the best she could do for Jesus. “No!” she replied. The old man slunk back into the shadows. The widow hurried away. She didn’t get far when she stopped. She knew what was like to be hungry. There were many times when she had to decide between food and medicine. There were other times she resorted to standing in the lone at the church that handed out a hot lunch.

The widow turned and went back to the alley. The old man stepped out of the shadows once again. “Here,” she said. She handed the man the food she had just bought. She went home resigned to the fact that she would have to serve Jesus her chicken soup and crackers. When she arrived at her apartment, a letter was in the mailbox. Strange, she thought, the mail service doesn’t deliver on Sunday. She took out the letter, opened it and read: “Dear Madam, thank you for the wonderful pot roast dinner. It was great. Love, Jesus.”

Where is it that we meet Jesus? Where are we most likely to encounter him? It is in the midst of the poor. The poor are near and dear to God. The prayer for today talks about God’s mercy, compassion and grace. Jesus showed us that moments of grace are frequently encountered when we interact with the poor. It’s time for us to copy Jesus’ way. It’s time for us to make a mature response in Christian love and service towards the poor.

The issue today, like last week, is the responsible use of wealth. The Holy Scripture speaks loudly to us this morning. Here is Amos, prophet of God, warning the Israelites who lived in the northern part of the kingdom. He pronounces judgment on the rich, proud, comfortable and complacent. Amos says to them “Change your ways or you will

**Our Responsibility to the Poor**  
**Year C – Proper 21 – September 26, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

be the first to go into exile!” Those who were well off didn’t heed his warning. The Assyrians would attack and carry them off into captivity. Amos was speaking about social justice!

The letter to Timothy today talks about Christians being generous! The Gospel of Luke is another story about wealth. This time the roles of the rich and poor are subjected to a reversal of fortunes. The Bible leads us to ask ourselves how we use of riches. The answer is important. It will determine our relationship with God!

What is it that both the rich and the poor need? Both need community! Those who have a community will be taken care of. Just think about it. When we are sick, when we experience loss, it is often those in our community that help us get through the crisis. We are all part of the same world. It’s time for us to learn to live with each other. This is not about imposing our will on others. It’s about learning to be God’s people and to care for one another.

Luke points out for us today the dangers of riches. When we have wealth and possessions they tend to make us think that we don’t need others. Wealth often isolates us. It makes us worry about others trying to get what is ours. Rather than sharing, we hoard our wealth. We don’t want to lose any of it!

Let’s look more closely at the Gospel now. Do you know what Lazarus’ name means? It is “God has helped.” It’s a good thing that God helped him. No one gave Lazarus anything. But it is he that ends up in heaven! The rich man ends up in hell. A great void separates him from Lazarus and Abraham. Who made this void? He did. His inability to help Lazarus created the separation. Jesus is warning us about our actions.

Many people have responded to Jesus’ call to care for the poor throughout the ages. St. Francis lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He had it all! Francis had a rich family, money, adventure and a family business that he would take over. But he was unhappy! One day he passed a broken day church and heard a voice, “Build my church!” He thought it meant to repair the building. When he finished, the message was still the same. It dawned on Francis that he was to build up the community of the church! He gave up his money and clothes, gave it to the poor and told his family that he would not take over the business. Francis would go on to serve the poor and to found a monastic order known as the Franciscans.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Albert Schweitzer was converted to Christianity and called to serve the poor by his passage. He would come to realize that his home, Europe was the rich man. For him, Africa was the poor man. Schweitzer would spend the rest of his life making a difference in the lives of the poor he met in Africa. Most of us are acquainted with Mother Theresa. She worked with the Sisters of Charity in the slums of Calcutta. When she was asked why she did her ministry there, Mother Theresa answered that to touch the poor was to touch Christ! She saw Jesus in the poor, just like the widow in my opening story! Mother Theresa would go on to add that ministry is both for Jesus and TO Jesus! There is something powerful awaiting us if we are willing to work with the poor.

**Our Responsibility to the Poor**  
**Year C – Proper 21 – September 26, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

Why are we so loathe helping the poor? I have heard many excuses, most of them right here in this congregation. “They are getting what they deserve.” What do the poor deserve? Be careful, or maybe we will get what we deserve! “They are nothing but drunks, addicts and mentally ill.” Well, that justifies our ignoring them. After all, they’re just sick. “Get a job.” That’s right. Doesn’t matter that they may have no skill, or live in a depressed area. “They don’t say thank you.” I wonder if the poor are embarrassed to have to take help? Do we always say thank you? “They want what is mine.” Whose wealth is it anyways? Aren’t all things God’s?

Who creates the poor? What are the causes? We might be shocked to learn that often we are the cause. Millions of children are born poor. Now that’s their fault, right? Millions of women are abandoned by men to live in poverty. I guess it is a man’s world after all. War results in veterans coming home to be alcoholics, addicts, mentally ill and poor. We fail to help them. Talk to the homeless men today. Many of them are veterans of some war. Our economic structures create and exploit the poor. The prevailing attitude of business today is, “We can get someone to do your job for less money.” So much for job security. Business lays people off, only to hire some of them back at lower wages and without benefits. Could we live on a 40-hour week at minimum wages? Gigantic debt stifles many local economies of third world countries.

The poor are all around us. Today it is Sudan, Haiti, El Salvador, Nigeria, Appalachia, downtown Detroit where the Eagles will play today and not but a few miles from us here in Camden. Camden is not only one of the poorest cities in the state; it is one of the poorest in the country. This summer, I was amazed at the number of panhandlers I saw in San Francisco. They stack out their corners for a few dollars. I got so I carried change in my pocket to give them a dollar or two. Two dollars, think about it. That’s about what a cup of regular coffee costs at Starbucks. Heck of a way to make a living, isn’t it? The most resourceful man I encountered was the one who stacked out near the ATM machine. I went to get a lot of money to spend on a nice dinner at an expensive restaurant. He asked me for a dollar or two after I got my money!

This Gospel is about a matter of heaven and hell. It’s about life, and Jesus wants us to have life. The Gospel is about what we do, or don’t do, with our wealth. If we ignore the poor, we ignore Jesus and risk hell! To be a Christian is to follow Jesus. It means we have to get excited about generosity, sharing and redistributing wealth. We are called to create a new world community and it starts right here, right now.

Professor William Willimon at Duke Seminary says that the opposite of both poverty and wealth is community. It will take a community of believers to make a difference in the plight of the poor. Until we understand that the poor are part of us, and our responsibility, we will fall short of what God desires. Communities care about all people, not just a few. Jesus cares about us. He points out that is a need for change in our lives. It’s time for us to act! The poor are our salvation.

**Our Responsibility to the Poor**  
**Year C – Proper 21 – September 26, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

We are the rich man. Who is the poor man, the Lazarus that needs our help? It's a matter of heaven, or hell ...