



A Time to Mend

A Social Justice Study
for Lent ~ 2014



North Carolina Council of Churches

Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

Table of Contents

Introduction: Those Who Do Without	3
By Steve Ford, Volunteer Program Associate	
First Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Health	5
By Shannon Axtell Martin, Regional Consultant, Partners in Health & Wholeness	
Second Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Farmworkers	7
By Chris Liu-Beers, Program Associate	
Third Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Hunger	9
By Aleta Payne, Development & Communications	
Fourth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Housing Insecurity ...	11
By Rose Gurkin, Program Associate for Administration	
Fifth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Creation	13
By Susannah Tuttle, Director, NC Interfaith Power & Light, and Aleta Payne, Development & Communications	
Palm Sunday: Poverty & Education	15
By Gene Nichol, Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity	

About Us

Since its inception more than 75 years ago, the North Carolina Council of Churches has used Christian values to promote unity and to work toward a better tomorrow. This is reflected through the Council's motto: "Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice."

Today, the Council consists of 17 member denominations, with more than 6,200 congregations and about 1.5 million congregants across North Carolina. The Council enables those denominations, congregations, and people of faith to impact the state on issues of health and wellness, climate change, immigration policy, farmworker rights, legislation, and much more.

We have published more than fifty lectionary-based worship aids touching on issues of social justice, and we also have a library of social justice sermons. You can find these free resources at www.ncchurches.org/lectionary.

To learn more about the Council and its work, visit www.ncchurches.org.

We pray that this study enriches the Lenten season as we all await the resurrection of Christ in whom there is peace and justice for all.

~

Written, edited and designed by the staff of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

Special thanks to Gene Nichol, recipient of the Council's "Faith Active in Public Life" award, Director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, and Boyd Tinsley Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law, for contributing the chapter, "Poverty & Education."

Cover photo by Flickr user: David.Harrington.

Introduction: Those Who Do Without

For many Christians, the somber season of Lent invokes the spirit of self-denial. Setting aside, in these six weeks leading up to Easter, something we value or enjoy becomes a means of honoring Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. In that same spirit, Lent becomes a fitting time to reflect on age-old divisions between rich and poor – and on our duty to help uphold those whom circumstance has treated harshly.

For people struggling amid poverty, self-denial is not a matter of choice. It is a lifestyle forced upon them not only during Lent but all year round.

It happens that 2014 serves as a milestone in the long-standing effort, championed by both religious organizations and secular leaders, to reduce poverty's toll on Americans. It was 50 years ago that President Lyndon Johnson, in his first State of the Union address, raised a battle cry resonating with hope and idealism: Poverty would be targeted in an all-out assault that Johnson likened to a war.

In a country where memories of the Great Depression had yet to fade – where President Franklin Roosevelt had decried “one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” – Johnson's call had enormous appeal. He pressed for and eventually secured the legislative framework we recognize today as the heart of America's social safety net. This was the brief era that gave us Medicare, Medicaid, federal nutrition assistance, Head Start and a Social Security program strengthened to better meet the needs of people too old to work.

A half-century later, poverty's raw edge has been blunted. Some critics of LBJ's “Great Society” agenda discount its effectiveness, but it seems clear that in the absence of programs such as Medicare, millions of Americans would be thrust into that nightmare existence where choices must be made among food, shelter, clothing and medicine.

Yet here's the bitter truth: Millions of Americans do indeed confront those kinds of choices. Safety net notwithstanding, the evolving economy has left them to scramble for crumbs falling from our national table. As North Carolinians, we have to reckon with the reality that among those struggling to afford the necessities of life are many of our neighbors.

Official measurements of poverty hinge on household income, and the levels that mark the poverty threshold – for example, a little more than \$23,000 a year for a family of four – are anything but generous. What's especially sad is that after declining for most of the second half of the 20th century, North Carolina's poverty rate has been on the rise.

Figures from the Congressional Research Office, cited by Rob Christensen in *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, show the rate here had dropped from an appalling 37 percent in 1960 to 12.3 percent in 1999. Yet by 2011, the share of North Carolinians living in poverty had climbed to 17.9 percent, or some 1.7 million of the people who attend our schools, seek treatment at our hospitals, worship at our churches. They're also the people who harvest our crops, clean our offices and do the other kinds of hard work that return neither much money nor status.

The rate among vulnerable subgroups, including African-Americans, Hispanics and children, is higher still – scandalously so. Law professor Gene Nichol, director of UNC-Chapel Hill's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, put it this way in another article for *The News & Observer*: “Over 1 in 4 of our children is poor – 41 percent of our children of color. Think on that. Over 4 in 10 of our babies, our middle-schoolers, our teenagers of color are constrained by the intense challenges of poverty.”

What North Carolina confronts is not a failure of the War on Poverty but an economic transformation that has cut cruelly into the ranks of the middle class even while it has boosted many employers.

Thousands of families who have managed to ride the crest of this state's burgeoning knowledge industries enjoy the fruits of good upbringing, good education, good timing and of course their own hard work. They are the people who live in our affluent neighborhoods, work in our glitzy office parks, shop in our high-end stores, dine in our fancy restaurants. Across town, meanwhile, or in the crossroads communities that dot our countryside, other people wonder where the next meal will come from. Or the next job.

Unemployment is the true curse that has left so many of our fellow North Carolinians at the end of their ropes. Only a few years ago, this state led the nation in the percent of jobs tied to manufacturing. But as textile, furniture and cigarette companies all underwent epic downsizing related to globalization and shifts in demand, the men and women who had been the backbone of their workforces were caught in the squeeze.

Jobs were being created in new fields such as biotech and data analytics, but they went to those who had acquired the necessary skills. That has left many would-be workers, unable to re-invent themselves, trapped in a limbo of hopelessness. A deep recession has made the situation even worse.

Introduction: Those Who Do Without (continued)

Education, then, lies at the core of any anti-poverty strategy with a chance of success. It is a long-term process, to be sure – but to shortchange our education system at any level, from early childhood to research lab, is to consign untold numbers of our fellow North Carolinians to lives of diminished prospects. Enlightened state leaders will recognize as much.

Fifty years' worth of struggle against poverty has yielded many victories. But the battlefield has shifted. Direct aid to the poor – for example, food stamps that keep children from going hungry – still is important. What must be expanded are ways for people stymied by lack of opportunity to get ahead, using their natural initiative and drive. That means a rededication by all of us to providing the crucial handholds: education and decent jobs.

The Lenten season, when we reflect on the nature and power of sacrifice, can summon us to reinvigorate the cause of all poverty-fighters by asking more not only of our neighbors seeking better lives but also of ourselves.

First Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Health

Scripture: John 10:10 (NRSV)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Social Justice Reflection

What does it mean to have life fully and abundantly, or as this Greek word implies, life, “exceedingly abundantly, or beyond measure?” It might mean spending time with family, working in a rewarding job, helping others, or following a passion. Good health is essential to enjoying any of these things. Is a full and abundant life a luxury only the wealthy can afford?

Research shows us that certain lifestyle choices can make a drastic difference in health – things like consuming fresh fruits and vegetables and getting enough physical activity. But even when those living in poverty want to make a healthy choice, they do not have enough good options available to them. Lack of parks, walking trails, and safe neighborhoods limit the possibilities for safe physical activity. Lack of grocery stores, farmers markets, and enough money to purchase fresh produce limit the healthy foods that are consumed.

The cheapest calories are the most empty, offering refined carbs and high sugar content rather than antioxidants and disease-fighting nutrients. What this means is that our neighbors who struggle with poverty and hunger are also the ones who are disproportionately hit by obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. They may be getting the calories they need to survive, but chances are they are not getting the ones they need to thrive. In order to get more calories per dollar, nourishment is sacrificed. Internationally, wealth and obesity are correlated, but we reverse that trend in the U.S., with poorer communities having higher obesity rates (and the related health problems), than wealthy ones, even though they are malnourished.

What can people of faith do to combat these trends of chronic disease and obesity that disproportionately plague those living in poverty? While corner stores and fast food restaurants often offer foods that are full of fat, sugar, and empty calories, so do many of our church-led food pantries and feeding programs. How do we help promote full and abundant lives in our communities?

Our churches can serve healthier church meals and encourage members to think through the implications of what kinds of food we are eating, donating, and serving. Healthy corner store initiatives, community gardens, and healthy food pantries offer hope for more accessible healthy food options. Churches can even open their doors and grounds to be used for physical activity through shared use agreements.

God calls us to full and abundant life, and Jesus said he came that this might be possible. Let’s all do our part to break the cycle of obesity, poor health and poverty so that this full and abundant life may be possible for all.

Closing Prayer

God of abundant life, let us truly hear your call to full and exceedingly abundant life for all of your children. Help us to find our place in promoting healthy and whole lives, starting with our own. Let this call for wholeness expand from our families to our neighborhoods, communities, cities and our state. Help us create a system where we all have a chance to be healthy. Amen.

Links

- www.healthandwholeness.org
- www.youthempowerededsolutions.org/?p=4263
- www.p4communitycare.org/programs-initiatives/nutrition-program/partnership-pantry/

Intergenerational Questions

Discuss the ways that the family works together to have a healthy life. Remember that you are your child’s best model. Ask them if they can think of ways to improve the family’s health. Select some suggestions and work together to implement them (walks after dinner, family bike rides, eating more fruit and vegetables, cooking together, have a pantry intervention replacing unhealthy foods with healthier options, less ‘screen’ time and more activity time). Make a commitment together to become healthier.

Explain that when people are poor, it is harder for them to make healthy choices. Brainstorm ways your family can help every family in your community to be more healthy. You can prompt this discussion with the activities below.

First Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Health (continued)

Intergenerational Activities

- Include packets of vegetable seeds for food pantries to give out with food boxes.
- Plant a garden at home or at church and donate the produce to a local feeding program.
- Donate healthy food items to local food pantries and feeding programs. (dried fruit, fresh fruit and vegetables, and protein-packed foods, i.e. eggs, beans)
- Ask your church to open its doors for an after-school exercise program that your family leads. Advertise it in your closest low-income areas.
- Start a monthly “soup night” at your home or in your church. Make a huge pot of chili or stew and let it be known that friends are welcome to drop by. Ask them to bring a healthy donation to be given to the food pantry. Try to expand the reach of this activity to low-income areas. Invitations might be given out through a food pantry or feeding program in your area.

Second Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Farmworkers

Scripture: Psalm 126:5-6 (NRSV)

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Social Justice Reflection

“Got food? Thank a farmworker.”

I’ll never forget how it felt to serve dinner to this group. About 30 hungry, tired farmworkers arrived back at their camp just as it was getting dark, and they were kind enough to welcome us into their humble space for a shared meal. This group of mostly young men had been busy harvesting sweet potatoes down East. Most were indigenous Mexicans who learned Spanish as a second language, who didn’t know any English.

As we spooned out rice and beans and poured soda from two-liter bottles, I was struck at how rare it is for any of us to meet the people who actually produce and harvest the food we eat. From our history of slavery to our modern industrial context, our society has not really reckoned with the grim reality of those at the bottom of our food chain.

Many of us don’t think much about where our food comes from. Did you know that almost all of the fresh fruits and vegetables that you eat were picked by hand? Farmworkers have always been the backbone of agriculture, yet too often their invaluable contributions go virtually unnoticed. Today, farming and agriculture is a \$70 billion industry in North Carolina alone, but a farmworker’s average annual salary is less than \$12,000.

Lent is a season for seeing things clearly, a time for level-headed reality checks about our complicity with counterfeit conveniences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described “cheap grace” as “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” When it comes to food in America, we enjoy a status quo that Bonhoeffer might describe as a “cheap abundance.” The paradox of cheap abundance is local stores without local food, calories without nutrition, farmworkers without food.

Farmworkers, like all different kinds of people in dire poverty, face challenges not only in getting enough to eat but also in other areas like housing and health. For example, farmworkers endure the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders of any workers in the country. Fewer than 20 percent of farmworkers receive health care.

But Lent is not the end of the story; resurrection is. Easter is coming. Jubilee is coming. The day is coming when those who sow seeds with tears into North Carolina topsoil will return home with shouts of joy because their hard work has been rewarded fairly. The day is coming when a worker who is hurt on the job can go to the hospital without risking his job, when a worker who is cheated can report his boss to the authorities. The day is coming when all farmworkers will earn living wages while living in safe, modern housing.

The only reason it hasn’t happened yet is because we’ve chosen to wait. We’ve tolerated an unfair status quo for far too long. Will this year be the year of change?

Closing Prayer

Worker God, who intends good for all your children, we seek your wisdom and courage as we work to change the harsh conditions under which so many labor. We remember the farmworkers, the growers, and the corporations. We ask that we might be your witnesses for good work, fair pay, and human dignity. Amen.

By Edie Rasell, NFWM Board representing United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries (<http://nfwm.org/education-center/worship-resources/prayers>)

Links

- www.ncfarmworkers.org
- www.ncfan.org

Intergenerational Questions

When you sit down to dinner, ask children if they have ever thought about the workers who helped pick the fresh fruits and vegetables in your meal? Ask them where their food comes from.

Help them to understand that food begins on a farm and there are many steps before it reaches your table. Tell them that often their food is grown and harvested by migrant workers.

Read the story “Amelia’s Road” by Linda Jacobs Altman. Discuss migrant workers and some of the conditions that have an impact on them. Explain that most migrant farmworkers receive low wages and are poor. They may be hurt as they work or become sick from the pesticides the farmers use. Healthcare may not be easily available to them. They often live in housing that is inadequate, crowded, and unhealthy.

Ask children if they can think of any actions they might take to understand migrant workers and to show their appreciation by helping them.

Second Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Farmworkers (continued)

Intergenerational Activities

- Arrange a visit to a local farm. Interview the farmer about the process of producing a crop and getting it on a family's table.
- National Farmworker Awareness Week is March 24 - 31, 2014. Visit <http://saf-unite.org/farmworkerawareness> for information.
- Participate in the 28th Annual Pilgrimage for Peace and Justice, April 13-19, 2014. Get more information at <http://www.wfpse.org/event/28th-annual-pilgrimage-peace-justice/>
- Organize a teach-in or presentation about farmworker issues. You can find farmworker facts here that you can use to create a presentation. And you can use short documentaries found here: <http://saf-unite.org/content/fact-sheets>; <http://saf-unite.org/content/documentary-projects>.
- Host a farmworker-related film screening and discussion in your church.
- Download farmworker factsheets and make table tents to put in your next meal at church.

Third Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Hunger

Scripture: Matthew 7:9 (NRSV)

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?”

Social Justice Reflection

As a parent, I cannot imagine that anyone brings children into this world joyfully anticipating that their babies will go hungry.

But in countries where starvation is brutally common, wars, climate change, and other human-made destruction can render it nearly impossible to meet the most basic need – nutrition.

So when a child or anyone else goes hungry in America, what’s our excuse? While our nation is largely exempt from life-threatening hunger, many of our neighbors experience it as life-altering.

In 2012, close to 50 million people in the US lived in food insecure households, almost a third of them children. That was just under 15 percent of American households. North Carolina was one of 10 states with a statistically significant higher rate, 17 percent. Food insecurity means limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate or safe food. Because of the way terms are defined and numbers calculated, unemployment is actually a stronger predictor of food insecurity than poverty.

Regardless, it comes down to being unable to afford enough food.

America is the anti-famine nation. We grow enough food. We have the means to transport it. Our government might not be collegial, but it is stable. Policies might divide us, but violent factions do not. We live in calm abundance.

And still people go hungry because they are too poor to eat.

Stories of hunger and food – literal and metaphorical – are found throughout the Bible. Manna was sent to those in the wilderness. When the disciples dithered about feeding the 5,000, Jesus called them on it, and he made enough for everyone, plus leftovers! And when it came time for him to leave us, he first broke bread with those closest to him in a sacrament many of our faith traditions continue today.

We know that food insecurity contributes to physical and mental illnesses in adults and kids. It slows children’s development and makes it harder for them to succeed in school. But Jesus was clear in his call to us to care for one another. So what are we to make of this? If we produce enough food for everyone, how do we justify our sisters and brothers and children being left with stones?

Embracing opportunities to support food pantries and food banks, to volunteer with Meals on Wheels, and to share fresh produce from community gardens are wonderful ways for individuals and families to make an immediate difference for someone in need. But we also need a sustained effort to change our nation’s food system so that people living in poverty don’t have to worry where their next meal might come from. And we need to establish and fortify a legitimate, achievable path to financial security that will eliminate their reliance on anyone else to be sure they will be fed.

We can agree that everyone doesn’t need the biggest house or the best car or the newest gadget. But shouldn’t every person have enough to eat?

Closing Prayer

God of graciousness and of plenty, help us to recognize the bounty of your creation and to generously share it with one another. Remind us that when one hungers, we all hunger, but that you have provided us with enough for all as long as we are good and faithful servants to our planet and to each other. Amen.

Links

- www.feedingamerica.org
- www.bread.org
- www.whyhunger.org
- www.nc.nokidhungry.org
- www.foodshuttle.org

Intergenerational Questions

Read the story “Stone Soup” to your children and discuss what the story teaches about sharing food.

Tell the story of Jesus feeding the crowd where Jesus says “You give them something to eat.”

Ask them if they have ever been seriously hungry or known someone at school who doesn’t have enough to eat. Ask them to think of ways they might help a hungry person.

Third Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Hunger (continued)

Intergenerational Activities

- Instead of going out to eat at one of your favorite restaurants, add up the money you would have spent there, eat at home, and donate what you “saved.” By sacrificing one meal out, your family can help to feed several children.
- For young children, take “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” book to the grocery store and do a Hungry Caterpillar Hunt to Fight Hunger -- selecting foods that the caterpillar ate. Then donate the food to a local food pantry, which accepts fresh produce.
- To illustrate the challenges of providing food for a family, take part in the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge. Choose one week to live on the average amount of food stamp support in North Carolina. Spend only the average allowance, per person, on everything that you eat, including breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and drinks. The average monthly benefit in North Carolina is \$121.37 per person, which equates to about \$4 per day.
- Have the children decorate a plain paper bag and write notes to put with contributions to a local feeding program. Don’t forget baby food and formula. Peanut butter and jelly, cereal and canned meats are also excellent choices.
- Participate in the holiday food baskets that are given through a food pantry at Easter. Your family could purchase the contents for a basket and include an Easter card from all of you.
- Participate in a local “Crop Walk” as a family.
- Take a trip to a local farm or garden and glean.
- Write a letter together to elected officials. Find the names of the people serving as your U.S. Representative and Senators by entering your zip code at www.congress.gov.

Your name and address

Date

Representative

Senator

U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515 Washington, DC 20510

Dear Representative ----- or Dear Senator

I have been learning about hunger in our nation. Do you know millions of children live with hunger or are at-risk of hunger just in our country? I believe that we have to change that. Children who are hungry get sick more easily. They are not able to do good work in school. It is time for our country to do something about hunger. I write to ask you to support laws that help hungry people. Everyone should have enough to eat. If we work together, we can end hunger in our nation.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
[your name and age]

Sample Letter:

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Housing Insecurity

Scripture: Luke 9:57-58 (NRSV)

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Social Justice Reflection

Where did you sleep last night? Were you warm? Did you worry about your safety? Did you have access to a bathroom? Did you have hot water? Did your roof leak?

Shelter is one of our most basic needs. After a warm shower, most of us slept soundly in a comfortable bed with blankets piled on. We had electricity to run the heat. We were not worried about leaks in the roof, cracks in walls that allow in rats or mice or cold. The kind of home that you have impacts social and economic success. Where you live determines where your children go to school. It determines your sense of safety, and how far you must go for services or employment. Your personal health is impacted by where you live. But these issues are only a few of the challenges faced by someone who is homeless or who lives in substandard housing.

Jesus himself experienced homelessness! Even at his birth, “there was no room in the inn.” When we see homelessness and open our hearts to caring, it is as if we are helping Jesus himself. Do you see the homeless all around you?

In North Carolina, more than 10,000 households go without heat in the winter; and more than 16,000 homes still lack indoor plumbing. For those who lack even inadequate housing, at least twenty North Carolina counties have no homeless shelters, and the shelters we have are filled to capacity.

Nationally, about 25% of homeless people are employed and about 40% of homeless men are veterans. But did you know that the average age of a homeless person in America is nine and that 40% of the homeless are children? One of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population is families with children. Homelessness is harmful to children. They get sick more often. They have more problems in school. Their families may be split up. They may even find themselves on their own. Tonight, more than one million children will be homeless in America.

Many situations can lead to being homeless. Not enough homes that people can afford, natural disasters, job loss, mental illness, death of a family member, addiction, domestic violence and medical emergencies. These are not unusual life crises. Everyone experiences these types of challenges in their lives, but not everyone becomes homeless.

The difference between people who experience them and don't lose their housing and those who become homeless is support. The homeless have one thing in common. They have a profound lack of support. They are often without the relationships that help many of us through life's setbacks.

May our response to homelessness be grounded in that support and in providing those relationships so that all might have a place to lay their heads.

Closing Prayer

Lord, open our eyes that we may see. We pray for peace, and justice, mercy, and forgiveness. We pray for an end to homelessness. We pray for those who yearn for a simple, decent and affordable place to call home. Help us to respond to the needs of the homeless as if we were responding to you. Give us the courage to make a difference. Amen.

Links

- www.nchousing.org
- www.habitat.org
- www.endhomelessness.org
- www.nationalhomeless.org
- www.homewardboundwnc.org

Intergenerational Questions

Ask your children to explain what home is. What do you need to have to have a home? Ask if they know anyone who is homeless or lives in a house that is not healthy or safe.

Read the book “Fly Away Home” by Eve Bunting or watch the video “Fly Away Home” by Reading Rainbow. Discuss situations that might cause a family to become homeless.

Ask your children what they would take with them if they had to leave home and had only 10 minutes to pack. Have them write down the things they would take. Discuss their choices and point out they will be without the things they left behind. Where would they get those things they need but no longer have? (basics like toiletries, warm clothes, etc.)

Read the scripture and explain what Jesus is asking us to do. Decide as a family to do one of the suggested activities on the next page.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Housing Insecurity (continued)

Intergenerational Activities

- Spend a day eating in survival mode. (No cooking facilities. No running water)
- On a designated day, whenever you need a drink of water or need water for cooking, go to the faucet outdoors. Drink only water, no soda or juice for that day.
- Don't look away from homeless people as if they do not exist. Make eye contact, say a few words. This reaffirms their humanity. Try to respond with caring.
- Become aware of your language. Try to minimize language in your own and others vocabularies that refers to people experiencing homelessness in derogatory ways. Remember they are people first. Be a model for others.
- Donate to local shelters or housing programs: clothes, household goods, books, survival kits (band aids, comb or brush, trial-size toiletries, toothbrush, toothpaste), toys, diapers, quarters for the Laundromat, baby wipes, formula, and school supplies.
- Donate hats, mittens, and coats.
- Prepare bedtime snacks in zip-lock bags and donate them to a shelter.
- Volunteer at a shelter or soup kitchen as often as you can. Include the whole family. This will give a real face to homelessness.
- Help build or fix up houses or shelters.
- Buy a bus pass and donate it.
- Donate to a tutoring program or summer camp scholarship program.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Creation

Scripture: Psalm 24:1-2 (NRSV)

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.*

Social Justice Reflection

We expect clean air and water to be plentiful. They are, after all, fundamental parts of God's great creation.

But the threats we pose to our planet and its resources are scientifically undeniable. We humans have proven to be careless in our treatment of the environment, frighteningly efficient in its destruction. And, as in so many cases, the burden of our actions falls disproportionately on the poor.

The coal ash spill in the Dan River has drawn international attention in recent weeks. Coal has for years been burned at a Duke Energy power plant in Eden, and the residual ash had been dumped into a holding pond nearby. In early February a pipe running beneath the pond collapsed, leaking thousands of tons of toxic coal ash and millions of gallons of contaminated water into the river. The coal ash has already flowed some 70 miles down the Dan, and public health officials are warning people not to touch the water or eat the fish.

Attracting less attention, a group of residents in the Royal Oak community of Brunswick County has worked against a different contamination threat in recent years. As the county has grown, it has chosen to truck construction and waste products away from gated luxury destinations and to a landfill established in the small, overwhelmingly poor community settled by freed slaves.

Residents, who have been denied water and sewer service from the government, live with the smell, tainted water, and associated health concerns. When the county sought to expand the dump in recent years, the people of Royal Oak began working with the UNC Civil Rights Center to stop it. Like many who bear the pressing burden of our environmental mistakes, it appears the most egregious thing anyone in the community did was be poor.

Read the description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. It is a story marked by God's abundant generosity intended to be shared by us all. God gave us dominion over this planet with the expectation that we would serve as caregivers. Likewise, the expectation is clear that we will care for one another. When humans damage the earth and seemingly direct the first and worst impact of that damage at those least able to counter it, we have doubly betrayed our responsibility.

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you have gifted us with land, sea and sky, and with all their inhabitants. Forgive us the choices that have damaged your precious creation and for the harm done our sisters and brothers who suffer first. Help us to build a sustainable way of life that honors your gifts to us and our responsibility to each other. Amen.

Links

- www.ncipl.org
- www.ncconservationnetwork.org
- www.crpe-ej.org
- www.greenfaith.org

Intergenerational Questions

Most kids learn about the environment, recycling, and the science of creation care in school. It is very important that you help them make the connection of all of those facts to their faith.

Explain that God created a "good" earth and made us the caretakers. Explain that all land and all water belong to God, and it is important that we make good decisions so that everyone can have clean water, abundant food and safe and healthy living conditions.

Explain that God loves every creature that he created and wants us to do the same. Read Matthew 25:40 where Jesus said "And the King will answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me. Talk about the coal ash spill that has been in the news and the impact that it has on everyone's well-being.

Talk with your children about ways that your family can care more for creation and make a difference.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Poverty & Creation (continued)

Intergenerational Activities

- As a family, join in a community clean-up in a local park or stream. It could be a fun contest to see who could bring back the most trash.
- Plant a tree. Martin Luther is said to have stated that if the world were to end tomorrow, he would plant a tree.
- Collect items to be recycled. Newspapers, cans, bottles, ink cartridges, batteries, and cell phones can all be recycled.
- Start to compost. Returning decomposing plant-based food waste to the earth can be a beautiful metaphor for resurrection.

Palm Sunday: Poverty & Education

Scripture: Proverbs 4:4-13 (NRSV)

“Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.” Hear, my child, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run, you will not stumble. Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.

Social Justice Reflection

Sometimes we try to reform everything except what most needs reforming.

Recently, some of my more accomplished (and less opinionated) colleagues released an immensely distressing study. Chapel Hill and Madison medical scholars demonstrated that poverty has direct, potent and harmful impact on early brain development.

By age four, kids living in economic distress show diminished brain tissue essential to process information. Potential identifying causes included poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, lack of suitable reading materials and stimulation, parental stress and unsafe physical environments. The causal list was long and non-exhaustive. The conclusion, though, was linear and inescapable: poor kids begin to experience diminished life chances almost immediately.

Then the Public School Forum released its 2013 figures revealing that North Carolina’s 10 highest spending counties, last year, spent almost \$60,000 more, per classroom, than our lowest spending ones. The unholy gap exists “because of the variation in property wealth across the state.” The richest counties have “more than 2 million in real estate capacity available per student.” Poorer counties have about \$380,000 in capacity for each school kid. The gulf widens every year.

These two distinct, but linked, reports touch on a much larger, undisputed, and even more opportunity crushing reality: Students from economically disadvantaged families perform decidedly less well, on average, than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. This, of course, is the famous zip code standard. Little matters so much to a kid’s success as the wealth of his family and neighborhood.

Proof of our stunning economic achievement gap is fulsome. Stanford’s Sean Reardon wrote last year that the link between family income and educational achievement “may be the most robust pattern demonstrated in all of education scholarship.” In other words, not only do we know wealthier kids have a giant leg up in educational opportunity, we know it more irrefutably than we know anything else about American education. Some first principle.

And the long-developed pattern is picking up speed. A new national report finds “the achievement gap between children from high and low income families is 40% larger for children born in 2001 than those born 25 years earlier.” In fact, it’s been growing for 50 years. The income gap is now “twice as large as the black-white” achievement gap. A half-century ago the numbers were reversed.

International comparisons tell an identical tale. Data from the massive Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that among 15 year olds, both here and in each of the 13 or so countries significantly outpacing us, students of diminished economic status have much lower test scores than their more advantaged homeland counterparts. In every single nation.

As Helen Ladd (Duke) and Edward Fiske (Fiske Guide to Colleges) put it: “Can anyone credibly believe that the mediocre performance of American students on international tests is unrelated to the fact that (almost a quarter) of our children live in poverty?”

The Stanford Economic Policy Institute, after sifting through the new PISA findings, determined that if the U.S. had an economic “composition similar to that of the leading nations,” we’d rise to 6th from 14th in reading, and to 13th, from 25th, in math.”

In other words, we do worse than our international competitors because we allow about twice as many of our kids to live in wrenching poverty. We’re the richest, to be sure. But we’re also content to lead the advanced world in child poverty – rejecting the clear command of Mathew 25:40. This, of course, creates unspeakable hardship for millions of innocent kids. It also makes it demonstrably impossible to have one of the world’s leading education systems.

The troubling correlation between education and poverty places North Carolina reform efforts in odd posture. For many state leaders, the drive to “reform” our education system – through vouchers, charters, endless tests, performance measures, and the like – is paired with policies which ignore and, in operation, actually increase child poverty. We’ll use every reform tool in the arsenal except the one that the entire world knows matters most – lifting kids from debilitating hardship. As if a child can learn effectively when she is hungry, sick, ill-clad, unsupported, unchallenged and unprepared.

The marriage of poverty and educational underperformance should also give pause to the many Tar Heels who claim, I can attest, that the only anti-poverty program they support is education. It’s a consoling thought, perhaps. But it is literally, quite literally, impossible to secure equal educational opportunity while 26% of our children, 41% of our children of color, live in torturous poverty.

It’s like trying to grow an oak tree in the Arctic. Can’t be done.

Palm Sunday: Poverty & Education (continued)

Closing Prayer

God, who loves all children, values all children, provides for all children, help us as your servants to knock down barriers that would deny all those children opportunity, success, and equality. Amen.

Links

- www.childrensdefense.org
- www.nccp.org
- www.aecf.org
- www.law.unc.edu/centers/poverty

Intergenerational Questions

Explain that many children do not have the same support system for doing well in school. Explain that it is difficult to learn if you are sick, hungry, etc.

Explain that poor families have lots more challenges than other families. Read Matthew 7:12. Discuss ways your child can respond with kindness to those classmates. This is an opportunity to introduce anti-bullying principles that will encourage your children to befriend a classmate who needs support. Pray with your children, asking for courage to treat others with kindness and love.

Over dinner or during family devotions ask your children some of these discussion starter questions:

- What kinds of things would make it hard for you to pay attention in school? (being hungry, not getting enough sleep, feeling sick, feeling that your parent don't care, not knowing where you will sleep that night, etc.)
- Do you have classmates that seem to struggle to do well in school? What makes them different? (free lunch, their clothes, their attention level, their behavior)
- What contributions does your family provide that make it easier for you in school? (nice home, breakfast, transportation, help with homework, etc.)
- How does it feel when you are not prepared for class?

Intergenerational Activities

- Find an early childhood nutrition program in your area. Contact them about what you can donate to supplement their program.
- Collect school supplies that can be donated to your child's classroom so that each child will have what they need to learn.
- If your child participates in a program like Scouts or sports team, contact the leaders and coaches about being a sponsor for a child who cannot participate due to lack of funds or support.
- Volunteer for after-school tutoring. Some schools have peer-to-peer tutoring and you can encourage your kids to participate.
- Donate your child's books that they no longer need to their classroom or a reading program, such as www.readandfeed.org.
- Provide financial support for a class field trip so that a child who could not otherwise afford it can participate.
- Volunteer at your child's school. Teachers need your help. Find creative ways to be supportive of every child in the classroom.