

“The First Church Potluck

John 6:1-13

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
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This morning we are commissioning three groups of volunteers that are going on mission trips in July. We send them with our blessings and prayers to Tijuana, Mexico, New York City and Smithfield, North Carolina.

Our youth are going to North Carolina as a part of World Changers. As in previous years, they will spend their time sprucing up and repairing homes. This marks the tenth year they have been involved with this organization and I am proud of them and their leaders.

World Changers began in 1990 by the North American Mission Board as an innovative way to teach missions education. The goal was to get students out of the classroom and on to the mission field. It has worked beautifully as the hands-on experience of repairing homes has transformed the lives of the volunteers as well as those they helped.

I like the name World Changers. It describes what we are about as Christians. As a matter of fact, I think every believer should be a world changer. Reaching out to those that are struggling is our calling and mission.

What are the characteristics of a world changer? I think people that make the world better need to be curious, compassionate, disciplined and unselfish. Let me elaborate.

World changers must be curious people that seek to find out how widespread poverty is and what the Bible says about it. Is poverty a problem in our world and do believers have a responsibility to alleviate it? You don't have to search hard to find answers to these questions. The G-8 Summit in Gleanegles, Scotland last week brought some horrifying statistics to light.

Almost three billion people live on less than two dollars a day; one billion of them on less than one dollar a day. These same people do not have basic sanitation, which contributes to uncontrollable diseases. Thirty thousand children die every day in Africa. That's eleven million a year and six million of them would live if they had safe drinking water, sanitary conditions and access to medical care. More than eight hundred million people go to bed hungry every night; three hundred million are children. Every 3.6 seconds a person dies of starvation. Six thousand people die everyday from the HIV/AIDS virus and 8,200 are infected every day.

In our own country, thirty-six million are poor, twenty-five million are hungry and forty-five million are without health insurance. There are 7,500 homeless children in the Chicago public school system and the average age of the homeless person in the Windy City is nine. Statistics in other major cities are just as alarming.

Does the Bible address the issue of poverty and disease? It certainly does. There are over 3,000 verses that address poverty, including one out of every sixteen in the New Testament. This is narrowed down to one out of every nine in the synoptic gospels and one out of every seven in Luke. God cares for the poor and expects people of faith to do the same.

I am reminded of what James wrote, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead” James 2:15-17.

“It is not the will of God that people go hungry,” writes Peter Gomes. “The gospel should not be offered as a substitute for the fundamental needs of human survival, for it is the will of God that those who hunger and thirst be given food and drink. The hunger and poverty of this world are not signs of insufficient piety but signs that we continue to mismanage the resources that God has given us.”

When we discover the appalling facts about poverty, we need to be grief-stricken and compassionate. “May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in,” said Mother Teresa after seeing the results of poverty. I have no doubt she would have agreed with what Gulley and Mulholland wrote in their latest book, If God is Love. “To be full of the Spirit is to have your heart broken by the same things that break the heart of God. We don’t need to accept Jesus in our hearts as much as we need to have the same heart as Jesus.”

This deep level of compassion should make us more disciplined. Only by living with less and curbing our ferocious appetites can we turn our attention toward the impoverished.

Recently I read a review of Tracy Kidder’s book, Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World. It is the story of the man that founded Partners in Health, an organization focused upon helping those oppressed by poverty. Dr. Farmer, who received a Ph.D. in Anthropology as well as a medical degree from Duke, is currently professor of medical anthropology at Harvard. He is also a specialist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston.

Dr. Farmer does not live in an elite section of Boston as you would expect. He doesn’t even live in Boston. His home is in Cange, Haiti, one of the poorest villages in the center of the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere.

In Haiti, there is only one doctor for every 20,000 people and the average life expectancy is under fifty. Dr. Farmer could not ignore these statistics and the people they represent, so he lives in Cange and commutes to Boston. In this squatter settlement, he combines his skills and passions, treating endless lines of people stricken with debilitating and life-threatening diseases.

Can you imagine the sacrifices Dr. Farmer is making to alleviate poverty and disease? I stand amazed in the presence of someone with this much discipline.

Discipline is not a virtue unless it leads to generosity, though. **World changers are unselfish people, extravagantly generous.**

I am indebted to Gulley and Mullholland for helping me to see the story of the feeding of the five thousand in a different light. It is their position that Jesus fed the multitude by convincing those that brought food to share with those that did not. He used the little boy that was willing to share his loaves and fishes to motivate the crowd on the hillside. If this little boy was willing to share what he brought, how could they refuse to be as thoughtful and generous?

The miracle that occurred that evening was the miracle of sharing. Everyone ate and food was left over, just like most church potlucks I have attended.

One of the first lessons we teach children is to share. What happens to us as we grow older and become more selfish? At what age does our favorite word become, “mine,” just as it was when we were two years old?

I must tell you that I am haunted by the words of Dr. James Forbes, Pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan. Recently, while preaching a sermon on one of the many passages that addresses poverty, he said, “No one will get to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” What if he is right?