

_____ This past week, our House of Bishops concluded their week long session in New Orleans. New Orleans was chosen as the spot for the gathering of the 300 for two reasons. First, we wanted any revenue that came out of this meeting to go to a people who desperately need it. Second, the Bishops wanted to see first hand and then react to just how devastatingly slow the recovery has been from Katrina. Third, the Bishops wanted to put their hands where their words were and take an active role in rebuilding the future of those poor people who still have no place to live.

The first sessions of the conference dealt with aspects of poverty and hunger relief on a world scale. As a church, we have made our first priority the carrying out of the UN Millennium Development Goals, as we try to erase extreme poverty from the planet. The next day, the Bishops met with medical anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer. He told them that the church's prophetic voice must be heard in the global debates about the most effective ways to eliminate extreme poverty and guarantee basic rights to all. The day after that, the

gathering took to the streets, working on nine projects in Louisiana and Mississippi to rebuild homes. There they were, bishops and their spouses, hanging sheetrock and driving nails. Bishop Wolf of Rhode Island said that day, “we have to get our hands dirty to serve the world.”

The next day was Sunday and after the Bishops worshiped and preached in local churches, they were urged later in the day to join the Diocese of Louisiana’s efforts with a group called We the People, to bring emotional and physical health back to the struggling poor of the area.

It was only on the last day of the conference, in the final hours, that the Bishops turned from their agenda of serving the poor to put together their statement in response “to questions and concerns raised by our Anglican communion partners.” Those questions and concerns, of course, have to do with the Episcopal church’s stance of offering full membership and communion, with all that entails, to every single human being, including gays and lesbians.

Now, if you watched, listened to, or read any coverage from the

House of Bishops this past week from any national media, I bet you did not hear one word about what the Bishops did or talked about for 90% of their time together. I am certain that all you heard was the question about sex. No matter how many times our Presiding Bishop and the rest of us keep telling the world that this church is all about eradicating extreme poverty and bringing full dignity to all so that we may bring about the kingdom of God as Jesus taught us, all anyone ever wants to hear about is...sex.

As a matter of fact, it is not just the media who only wanted to hear about sex, it was also our own church. There are a group of Anglican leaders like Bishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria, who don't care what the Episcopal church is doing to help his own people escape poverty. All he wants to know is whether we are going to change our stance on the sex issue. There are also four Bishops in the United States who didn't seem to care last week what we were doing to help the poor of the Gulf coast. All they wanted to know was whether we were going to stop ordaining people of one sexual persuasion.

How did this happen? How did the world and our church get to

the position of believing that religion is more about sex than it is about poverty? Now don't get me wrong, I like sex as much as the next guy. I wouldn't mind if we got to talk about sex every week. But the truth of the matter is that for every one reference to anything of a sexual nature in the Bible, there are thirty references to the poor. The word sex appears in the NRSV translation of the Bible...one time. The word poor is there 168 times. There are 97 references to immorality, impurity and perversion in our sacred text and 540 references to money. And perhaps most importantly of all, Jesus, never says one word about sex anywhere in the entire Gospels. The closest he ever gets is one conversation with the Pharisees about divorce.

So here we are this morning, hearing another Gospel from Luke, and for the umpteenth week in a row, what does Jesus talk about? The poor! What does Jesus tells us is the key to salvation...again? Taking care of the poor and giving them new life. And the lesson from 2 Timothy? That we are to share our riches with those in need, and that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

Jesus and the entirety of our sacred text consistently puts the

overwhelming emphasis of our faith on the issue of poverty and justice. Jesus states at the beginning of his ministry that this is the basis of his work on earth. But we keep shifting the focus to something Jesus never said one word about, to something Jesus apparently didn't give a flying flip about. My friends, this is more than misplaced priorities. This is a complete and utter disregard for Biblical tradition.

Perhaps because these texts speak to us so bluntly with admonitions against stuff that sounds dangerously close to our own lifestyles, we need to shift the focus. Could it be that we just can't face how we are failing the poor and not bringing about the kingdom of God? Is that why we want to make believe that God's issue is sex? Could it be that if we change the issue to sex, then we can point the finger at someone else and say, look, it's your stance on this that is against biblical teachings, relieving us of our own guilt for not dealing with God's real issue?

That was the conclusion of one Dr. Albert Schweitzer in 1905. While members of the church were fighting about Victorian sex values,

he heard today's parable and wrote the following words: "We British are the rich people. Out there in Africa lies wretched Lazarus. Just as the rich man sinned against Lazarus because of his lack of heart and compassion, so the rich man would not put himself in Lazarus' place...And so we English have sinned against the poorest of the world at our gates." Then Albert Schweitzer picked up and spent his life serving the people of Africa.

The good news for us here in Page America, is that we have an opportunity not afforded Dr. Schweitzer. We don't have to go anywhere to respond to the Gospel. While we live in the U.S., we also live in the midst of non-America, the sovereign Navajo nation. Lazarus is literally on our porch waiting for us to respond.

Today's lessons are not only one more example of the fact that we must keep our focus on serving the poor, they also offer us a methodology for how we are to accomplish that. We begin with the realization that the overly simplistic interpretation that being rich is evil and being poor is good has allowed us to avoid what Jesus and the author of 2 Timothy were really saying. Wealth in and of itself is not

the problem. We are presented with many Biblical stories where rich people reach salvation just fine. One of them is the gentlemen that embraces Lazarus after his death. Abraham was an incredibly rich person on earth. And while the Gospel of Luke writes about many rich folk who are in a heap of trouble, don't forget about others we hear about who are praised and honored. How about, for example, all those women who financially supported the ministry of Jesus out of their wealth, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Suzanna?

It is not being rich that it is the problem, it is when we let our wealth blind us to the needs of others sitting right at the gates in front of us. The rich man in today's Gospel manages to avoid making eye contact with Lazarus each day, making believe he is not even there. Once in hades, he obviously sees Lazarus just fine. But rather than apologize to him as the audience is expecting, he has the audacity to continue to refuse to acknowledge Lazarus to his face. Rather than speak to Lazarus, which would be to recognize him as a human being, he asks Abraham to have Lazarus come give him a drink.

There is the teeth of today's message. The rich man's wealth has

so distorted his vision that he is unable to understand or acknowledge the plight of Lazarus right in front of him. That's what prosperity can do to all of us if we are not constantly on the lookout.

It reminds me of the way I was taught to walk down the street in San Francisco. I was instructed never to make eye contact with the homeless or those looking for a handout. If you don't see it, it doesn't exist, if you close the shades, you can avoid seeing the pain around you. If you live in the exclusive neighborhood, you won't see the struggle of those suffering with nothing. If you put a gate on your community, you can keep Lazarus outside, so you don't have to see him at all.

But despite these lessons, society and religion keeps going back to sex. Maybe Freud is in part to blame for this in the modern era, telling us that the driving force behind all human action is sex. But the multitude of examples in our Sacred text suggest that from very early times, something else has acted as humanity's prime motivation. Today that theory is known as the "territorial imperative." The idea that first and foremost, we have a need to establish and protect our

own stuff.

It is territorial imperative that causes us to draw lines around people and property and declare it all “mine.” Parents know how deeply rooted this is in our psyche, because we watch our children begin with this concept before they can walk. In the movie *Finding Nemo*, it is the seagulls that capture territorial imperative as they all clamor over one crab yelling, “mine, mine, mine, mine.” We grow up and put No Trespassing signs to warn others to not step over the line. We station border agents at the entrance to our countries to make sure Lazarus can’t get in. When threats of war or terrorism occur, we become isolationists, passing so called Patriot Acts to keep Lazarus out. We build the same boundaries in our churches, making them fortresses to hole ourselves up against the nasty world beyond our walls.

But as we hear in today’s parable, when we try to separate ourselves from the world’s danger and suffering, what we end up doing is separating ourselves from God’s love. The rich man during his life, drew his lines around his property and his possessions just like we do

today. It is this territorial imperative that prevented him from seeing Lazarus right outside his gate, and continues to provide us a methodology to be blind to the hurts and pains of those suffering in the world today. Jesus suggests a different way.

How do we begin? Very simply, with the example Jesus gives us.

Today's parable is the only one in all of the Gospels where Jesus names someone. Naming someone in Mediterranean culture has profound implications. It means that the person is held in a position of honor. Today note that Jesus names the poor man Lazarus, which means "God helps." When we begin naming people, what we do is take individuals out of a broad category the poor, the rich, the gays, the teenagers, the clergy, and we begin to truly SEE them. We remove the blinders from our eyes. We begin to see the actual person and not a generalization about a class of people. And once we do that, we can no longer go back to making believe they are not there. It is when we get to know people personally that we accept and respect them. Our psalm from this morning makes this clear. "I will protect him, because he knows my name."

That is why the first thing we do at St. David's is ask you your name and give you a badge with it. When we name others, we see them, and when we see them, we cannot help but move beyond lives of self-centeredness to seeing the plight of others as our own plight. Only then can we erase the lines we have drawn to separate ourselves from others, and walk into the circle of all of God's kingdom.

My friends, we have done our best as a church to respond to the concerns of parts of the Anglican Communion about our stand on sexuality. St. David's has done our best to respond to those concerns by writing our own documents about this issue. Many of you wrote individually to address the concerns. I did the same thing. It is critical that we state clearly our intention to bring dignity to every human being regardless of their sexuality. But...enough already.

We've got work to do. We are called by Jesus and by all of our sacred text to SEE Lazarus around us, to call him by name, so that he can live in dignity. We are called to lift him up, to bind his broken heart and to free him from oppression. It is time to stop fussing over an issue Jesus never said a thing about. It is time to bring about God's

kingdom, and we can't do that if we are spending all our time fighting over what the Bible says in those eight cryptic places it mentions homosexuality. It is time to hear and respond to today's Gospel. It is time to live into the thousands of blatantly clear passages that tell us what we are to do with our lives. It is time to stop picking up our marbles and going home when we disagree with someone's theology and start rolling up our sleeves and start caring for those in need together, despite our differences in theology.

When history looks back on this age in the Anglican communion, no one is going to remember Bishop Akinola's wining about the Episcopal church's theology and his so called "ordination" of Bishops to save America from our "sinful" biblical interpretation. What will be remembered, what will be embraced, is the truth and reconciliation of Bishop Desmond Tutu, the love and respect and dignity that he brought to a long suffering people.

It is now time for all of to get back to the real work at hand. Let us get back out there and bring healing to Lazarus. Let us SEE those in need and utilize all our resources to NAME them and bring them

back to dignity and honor. Amen.