



**“To Whom Much
is Given....”**
Isaiah 58:6-11,
Luke 12:15-21, 48b,
1 John 3:18-19
29 June 2008
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The work of our United Church’s Mission and Service fund goes round the world including the small, Central American country of El Salvador. I want to tell you a story that comes from one of our mission partners in that country.

We assist the aid and development work of Emmanuel Baptist Church. They still do incredible work although this story is some 20 years old.

One of the Church’s physicians was out in a remote area offering a free clinic. A patient who lined up to see her was a young woman in her early 20s. She’d already had six children and she looked haggard and undernourished and much older than her years.

The doctor asked her: “how many more children are you going to have?” The woman responded: “As many as God wishes.”

Now to Canadian ears, that woman’s response is hard to fathom and it’s tied in with her understanding of God. She didn’t feel she had control over her body. There is great unworthiness in that. I am poor, there is nothing I can do about my situation. Life is hard. I pray to God in my sufferings but the more I endure, the greater my glory will be in heaven. The Kingdom of God is in the after life.

Now, more than 30 years ago, Latin American Catholic priests and nuns started really listening to comments like this. They said there’s something wrong here. These poor people don’t understand that God loves them. That God wants them to have enough to eat and that their children have full bellies. These people need to understand that they have God-given power over their lives. Jesus comes to tell us that the Kingdom of God is in the here and now.

So they began teaching people to read and giving them Spanish Bibles. They did Bible studies that had peasants reflecting on their own situation – coming to understand they didn’t need to accept poverty. They could change their lives. It was called a “preferential option for the poor.” In the Latin American context it was incredibly exciting. A very important message in countries where the vast majority were poor and a handful of people were wealthy. Protestant Churches such as Emmanuel Baptist Church in El Salvador and our own United Church jumped on the band wagon. We were helping and still are today -- poor people discover their God-given worthiness and take control of their lives.

It’s an incredibly powerful message – this preferential option for the poor. It’s rooted in Scripture such as our Luke passage. When we die and stand at the edge of heaven, says

Scripture, we will be asked what have we done to help the poor and needy. Jesus says it better be an affirmative response.

A preferential option for the poor is a vital message in countries like El Salvador that have known social inequality for hundreds of years. Where the vast majority of the population lives in poverty. The problem is how we come back to Canada – a country with a more equitable system -- and preach it in our middle class United Church congregations. We've been preaching this in the United Church for decades and it's a real problem.

Because if we say 'preferential option for the poor' aren't we saying God loves the poor and for the rest of us, God doesn't love us as much?

Certainly sounds like it doesn't it? As a United Church as a whole, we've pushed out business people and entrepreneurs. We've made it a very uncomfortable environment.

Does God love us any less because we live in a comfortable home and we have food on our table? No, God loves us through and through. God, however, does expect much of us – and one aspect is to keep an eye out for the poor. That's why the verse which ends our Luke reading is so important: "To whom much is given, much is expected. If we've been blessed by a good upbringing or at least healing from that, opportunities for education, opportunities for good employment, then we are given much. So God expects much of us. That's OK because we can rise to the challenge, God being our helper.

Our Board Chair Shawn Rose says one key reason small business owners fail is because they believed they would fail – that they weren't good enough.

To be rooted and grounded in God's love. What an important message that is for each of us to know and experience – no matter our social status. In fact, what we know is at the deepest part of self-centredness is the lack of self-esteem, the lack of loving oneself. When we know we are beloved then it's much easier for us to love another.

As you know, Joel and I were in Toronto last weekend at a United Church event called More Franchises than Tim Horton's. (Just over 3400 churches to 2200 franchises)

Our National church asked for papers from across the country from congregations doing ministry in new ways. The response was so great they had 65 workshops. They thought they'd break even at 200 registrants and nearly 600 people registered.

So many people that we needed to meet in this large downtown Toronto Church called Bloor Street United Church. It's a Church where many significant events in our Church's history have occurred.

Throughout those workshops and most of the plenary sessions – I experienced sincerity, graciousness and quiet excitement. United Church folks like us – facing challenges of a new era, dealing directly with local contexts and having results.

But then there was the opening plenary session on the Thursday night. It began well and good with wonderful singing and music and went steadily down from there. The idea was to do Cross country check up, CBC style. Great, I thought. You've gathered people from across the country – we'll get to know some people here in this large room.... Wrong.

They literally did have people telephoning in. From the Maritimes, two from Toronto, one from Victoria and then back to rural Ontario – because we’re in Central Canada and of course the Prairie Provinces don’t necessarily exist do they? Two facilitators sat in chairs at the front of the Church, listening to the people who called in – through one speaker in that one big room.

Six people, each giving us their short sermon– and we can’t see them nor engage with them. And the first two tell us that the secret to our salvation as a United Church was the preferential option for the poor. They criticized the Emerging Spirit work of the United Church that’s aimed at reaching a middle class people. Resources that this congregation has used and found helpful. That money would have been better spent – giving it to the poor.

My mind wanders back to here, our reality, our congregation. This congregation is feeding the poor, this congregation is sitting down with the poor. We have an interchurch Food Bank, we’re working with agencies like Literacy for Life to get at the root causes of poverty. But we also know that we are a middle class people called to reach out to other middle class people. There are others who are hurting, who go through marriage break ups, who deal with the hurdles of life and need to know that they are God’s beloved. Life’s hurdles have a way of wearing at us – no matter our economic status. We need God’s compassion and love and the companionship of others who follow God – to experience our belovedness. We’re working at a balance in this small congregation – a good balance between outreach to the poor and outreach to middle class folks such as ourselves – and we have much to teach the rest of the Church.

In United Church ethos, I was taught Food Banks are just band aid treatment and we really need to be getting at the root causes of poverty. But coming to this Church – you taught me different. Our Food Bank clients are the disabled, mentally ill, some relying on pensions, single moms whose income can’t stretch enough. They are people who are enmeshed in the poverty that was their parents’ reality and now their reality. We feed some people trapped in addictions. Through the food bank, we keep in touch with them, keep pointing to another way – that statistically we know many won’t take. But we still hope. In the meantime, we ensure they don’t starve and their children don’t starve.

This throwing in the towel and going totally with the poor – that’s not a Gospel message. Nor is it realistic.

With some of our food bank clients, we cannot go down to the depths of the well where they are. It’s deep, it’s murky, it’s confusing. We can’t be pulled in. We need to be at the edge of the well, staying healthy. Because when they’re ready to get out of that mess, someone’s got to be up top, helping them pull out of the depths and pointing to another way of health and goodness.

“To whom much is given, much is expected,” Jesus says. We’re a middle-class Church. It’s taken hundreds of years of our ancestors hard work, grounded in the Gospel to get us here. We’re working on a balanced mission in this congregation. It’s an important one.