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Hope Lutheran
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Good morning. Welcome to Hope on a beautiful Sunday morning. We're happy to have you here. A particular greeting to you who may be our guests. If there's some way we can serve you, would you indicate that in the welcome card you'll find in the bulletin? And then an encouragement for everybody, members and nonmembers alike, to turn in the welcome card. Put it in the offering plate.

There are three opportunities today to respond to people in need: You can eat pancakes after the service and support the youth who are [going] on a mission trip to Jamaica this summer. You can sign up to walk or to sponsor someone who's walking in the Crop Walk. (There are some pastors I know who are walking, and they need all the help they can get. If you want to, stop by the back table.) And then you can sign up to sponsor a Compassion child. You'll hear about that in the sermon. We hope that there's an opportunity for you to do that.

Jesus commanded, "Love one another." We come to worship the God who is love that we may learn to love one another. Jesus said, "No longer do I call you servants, now I call you My friends." We come to worship the God who's friends with Jesus. Let us sing praise to God and live and love in friendship toward the human family through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's lesson is from James chapter 2, verses 1 through 8 [NRSV]: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus



Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet'? Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

“You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Today's gospel is from Matthew chapter 25, verses 31 to 40 [NRSV]: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all his angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to

me.” This is the gospel of the Lord. You may be seated.

Please join me in prayer.

God, we are indeed grateful for Your faithfulness to us, for that grace, God, which transforms our lives through the life, death and resurrection of Your Son and that grace, God, which seeks to transform who we are as Your people living in this world as well.

So, God, as we gather once again this morning to hear Your Word for us, we pray that You would open our hearts by Your Spirit’s power, that You would move us, that You would challenge us, that You would guide us, that You would direct us. Speak to us, Lord, a word You see that You have for us, and in turn, God, may we respond however we, as Your faithful people, have the possibility of responding. And we pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

After the resurrection for a period of about 40 days, Jesus appeared to His disciples on a variety of occasions. He appeared to both assure them and also to focus them with words such as these: “You are My witnesses. I’m sending you into the world to continue My mission. Go and baptize, also teaching all that I have commanded you.” And to Peter, He got explicit: “Do you love Me, Peter? If so, follow Me.”

Following Jesus was what God called the disciples to do then. It’s our responsibility as Christian people today, for if the kingdom of God is coming into this world, the tangible ways it is coming [are] through the work of those who live a type of faith and who follow the teachings of our Lord and Savior.

Jesus gave us a commission when He said, “Follow Me.” And so today, I’d like to focus our following of Jesus on an issue that is close to the heart and mind of God Himself, and that is, ministry to the poor.

Did you know that God has a heart for the poor? Wess Stafford — he is the CEO of Compassion International — he lived much of his early life in Africa, grew up there in the midst of poverty, and he sums up God’s position very straightforwardly. He says, “God says, ‘You mess with them, you mess with Me. You bless them, I will bless people.’” That’s very blunt, but Scripture itself is very straightforward.

In the gospel we have this image presented as a judge of all people, Jesus returning in full majesty, in power, in glory. And He comes sitting upon the throne, and He comes to divide those who will inherit the kingdom of God from those who will not. And the litmus test in terms of one’s salvation is how they treated the poor.

Jesus, in effect, says, “When you treat those who are least in My family with mercy, you are, in turn, showing mercy to Me.”

And the biblical mandate contains over 550 verses that deal specifically with God’s heart for the poor. For example, Proverbs 19 [verse 17, NIV] tells us, “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.” Or Deuteronomy 15 [verse 11, NIV], “There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Jesus Himself, in articulating His mission as He began His ministry, had the whole Old Testament to choose from, and what He chose was a section — verses from Isaiah [Luke 4:18-19, NIV, quoting Isaiah 61:1]. These ones: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

When you read and study Scripture, you cannot help but notice God’s inclination to speak out on behalf ... [of the poor].

Certainly, we all know that Jesus died on the cross because people matter

profoundly to God. Sinful people like me, like you, matter profoundly to a holy God. And so Jesus was sacrificed on my behalf. He was sacrificed so that I, who was a poor and helpless sinner in God's presence, could be well and acceptable to a holy God.

Second Corinthians [8:9, NIV] puts it this way: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

When you consider that God in Jesus has been about the work of helping the helpless — and by God's definition, that includes you and me, because we matter to Him — it makes perfect sense that God would have a heart for the poor. And as followers of Jesus, so should we.

The biblical mandate is plain. It's not about a political agenda. It's not about a humanitarian philosophy. It's about developing in each one of us a heart that represents God's heart in this world. So as Christian people, we are to be standing up for those who are helpless, giving a voice to those who have no voice, reaching out to those in need, both spiritually and physically needy.

According to one definition, this is what makes the poor, poor. It's a fact that they cannot speak up for themselves. The *World Development Report* lists — gives a definition of poverty this way. "Poor people live without fundamental freedoms of action and choice that the better-off take for granted. They often lack adequate food and shelter, education and health, deprivations that keep them from leading the kind of life that everyone values. They also face extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation, and natural disasters. And they are often exposed to ill treatment by institutions of the state and society and are powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives. These are all dimensions of poverty."

By definition, poverty limits the voice of those who are poor. It's no wonder that

Scripture admonishes us: Speak up for those who don't have a choice.

Now, certainly there are all kinds of rationales I could articulate not to speak up for the poor, reasons like, you know, I work hard, I earn what I have, so should they. Or there is so much poverty in this world, how in the world can I, as one person, ever hope to make any kind of significant difference?

And, you know, there may be some truth, in fact, to the hesitations that we have to reach out to the poor. But again, bottom line, more than anything, Jesus is concerned about your heart becoming like God's heart. And so His teachings do not reflect any wisdom on why you should not reach out to those who don't deserve it. Jesus' focus is just the opposite, for He wanted you to get in touch with God's grace, to reflect that in your life.

And so His teaching focuses us toward grace. Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve." So should you. "Love one another," He said, "just as I have loved you." And also, in terms of the gospel's words, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you in turn do it to Me." In so doing, Jesus knew we would begin to develop a heart that reflected the image of God's heart for all people.

You know, I have a dream. It's not just my dream; it comes from Scriptures. It's a dream shared by many in this congregation. It's a dream that every small group, every youth group — I know every youth group — indeed, every person in this congregation would take personal responsibility for their ministry to the poor.

As I said, I know this dream is shared by others in our congregation who because of their faith, who because of life experiences, who because of exposure to poverty have had the light go on in a way for them it's never gone on before. And I'd like you to have an opportunity to hear from a couple of those folks. We put it on a video piece, simply because of the number of experiences and the ability to get them to all the services. So

let's take a moment and look at their perspectives here on poverty and the poor.

[Video is shown.]

I'd like to follow up on that last piece there, that response piece. In the context of celebrating — offering some opportunities — but also celebrating what we have going as a congregation, because the reality is, we do much in terms of ministry with the poor. For example, Churches Unite for the Homeless. We've got a connection with that organization. Folks have been working in the context of our congregation serving that ministry for many years, right here in the community. Also, in terms of Minnesota Food Share, which we were with in March there. We collected about 4,000 pounds of food and \$2,800 in donations. And that is significant, and we need to celebrate that.

There's a Crop Walk going on today in town. Hope Lutheran has had a connection with that effort in terms of reaching out to the poor as well for many years, and that opportunity exists in the south hallway. And so there is much that's being done.

Another opportunity that I'd like to present to you — this insert that's in your bulletin today is a Habitat for Humanity opportunity. And about three weeks ago, four weeks ago, we threw out an opportunity, and the response was overwhelming. Better than a hundred folks said they'd like to be a part of a Habitat for Humanity house. And so we're gonna do the "House That Hope Built." We applied for a grant, and we received the grant — \$20,000 — to get us going. And a task force is working on this. The property has been given to Habitat, there's been a family that's selected, and the wheels are moving forward. And at this time, we're trying to get all the ducks in a row, so to speak, and we need unskilled volunteers. We're gonna need volunteers for help with food and for building and child care and all those pieces. But also, skilled help and material donations. And the more of those pieces we can get in place, the quicker the project can be moved forward and done, for a lesser price as well.

And so, I encourage you to consider that today. There may be a way that you can help and want to help, and that's a critical piece as well.

Then today — we're calling today "Compassion Sunday" because we've had a connection with Compassion International. You can see the connection. Better than 200 children sponsored by members of our congregation, and that is significant. We need to celebrate that.

Right now, though, however, Compassion is an organization that works throughout the world. There are 17,000 children waiting to be sponsored. And that sponsorship means that they eat in a healthy way, they have education opportunities provided for them, they have faith opportunities provided for them, and health opportunities, good health care. And that takes place in the context of an organization that is second to none in terms of getting the money that you sponsor directly to the children. And so this is a good organization, and it is a way to make a difference in the life of one person, a child. And that will impact their family and others as well, the whole community.

Also, in the south hallway today, there's an information table about Operation Boot Strap. You heard that mentioned on the video there. That's a Lutheran girls' school in Tanzania, Africa, that provides educational opportunities for young girls and women in a culture that really has not provided that opportunity in the past. There's a connection with Concordia College there in terms of some girls that have come over to further their education. And I would simply encourage you to stop by any of these for more information. I can't cover all the information in the time that we have here. But take some time to ask yourself where you would like to get involved and to look at the many opportunities that we have to make a difference.

In closing, I'd simply like to focus us on one last interaction that Jesus had with a young man. He came up to Jesus one day with the question, "What must I do to inherit

eternal life?” — the same issue that our gospel text addresses today — and Jesus said, “You know the commandments, follow them.” And the young man replied, “I have worked to observe the commandments since my youth.” And the Scripture tell us Jesus looked at the young man with deep respect and admiration. He said, “You still lack one thing. Go sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come follow Me.”

Now, I’ve got to tell you, when I read that Scripture lesson, I’d just as soon skip it because I don’t know what to do with it. It forces me to look at my heart. And when I look at my heart, I wish I was more compassionate, more merciful. You know, folks might tell me, “Oh, Pastor Chuck, you’re a kind, nice guy.” Well, I would like to be merciful like God is merciful. And I know I have a long way to go there when it comes to having a heart like God. But at the same time, I also know the Spirit of God challenges us and says to me, “Don’t walk away from the poor. You can make a difference in the life of one person in this world.” And in so doing, God says, “I’ll work on your heart.” And I need to trust God with that. And indeed, when I respond by reaching out to the needs of the poor, God is working there to shape and mold and move my heart to be more like His. What about your heart?

Let us pray.

God, we know we live in a world, a world that absolutely depends on Your grace. Without Your grace, it’s lost. God, it is a world characterized by brokenness and those who are outcasts, those who are poor in spirit and physically — in ways physically. God, You call us to be instruments of Your peace, instruments of Your mercy. And so we pray, God, that You would work on our hearts, that You would give us a response that is in line with our gifts and that, God, our response would — indeed, You would take it and use it to make a difference for Your kingdom.

We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let us join in the statement of faith printed in your bulletin.

We believe in the presence of God, His nearness to protect, His love to comfort, His law to obey, His Spirit to guide, His Word to instruct, His grace to share through Jesus, the Son, who makes God's presence vivid through His holy life, His painful death, His victorious resurrection and continual intercession on our behalf before the Father in heaven. Our lives are rooted in this gospel. This is mystery, but it is also truth. This we believe.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we pray that You will move us to be compassionate toward the poor and that You will have compassion upon those lives who are in constant danger, that You will bless the efforts of those who seek peace.

All of these requests we make in the name of Him who taught us to pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Please rise for the benediction and our closing song.

The Lord bless you and keep you and make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.