

WHAT DO WE LEAVE FOR THE POOR?
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
November 12, 2006

Ruth 2:1-13

One of the things I remember most clearly about being in Sunday school as a child was the pictures of Biblical scenes. Displayed around the room would be pictures of David playing his harp, Jesus blessing the children, Deborah the warrior judge leading the Israelites in battle.

And here, too, would be a picture of Ruth gleaning in the fields. Ruth would be portrayed as an attractive young woman demurely dressed, with nary a hair out of place even though the text says she had been on her feet from morning to night. As a youngster, and a city boy at that, I wasn't too clear what "gleaning in the fields" meant, but I supposed it was sort of like harvesting, since the picture of Ruth had her holding a sheaf of wheat in her arms.

It was only later that I learned that gleaning in the fields was something that poor people did. In the time of the harvest, the poor would walk along behind the reapers and gather any leftover grain that hadn't been collected.

It turns out that in Israel the people who harvested were under the command of scripture to be sure to leave some for the poor. Here's how the book of Leviticus puts it:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.¹

Here is one of the ways that Israel provided for the care of the poor: they left some of the fruit of the harvest in the field, so that the poor could come along and collect it. That's

¹ Leviticus 19:9-10, cf. Deuteronomy 24:19-22.

what Ruth was doing. As a poor person and a foreigner, she was totally dependent on the kindness of the reapers, and later of Boaz, who said: “Be sure to leave a little extra for her.”

“The poor you always have with you,” Jesus famously said. Every society has poor people. Every society needs to ponder some way to help the poor, those at the bottom of the ladder, those who, without the support of others, will perish. What do we leave for the poor?

That doesn't not seem to be a very pressing question in American society right now. We didn't hear much at all about caring for the poor in the recent election. There was little or no mention about affordable housing, affordable health care, avoiding malnutrition. Probably the advisors to the candidates said that these were not issues that voters were much concerned about.

A survey a couple of years ago found that the typical household in the U. S. spends \$240 a year on fast food, but only spends \$5 a year to assist children in poverty. What is more, 6 out of 10 who answered the survey said that, No, they didn't think it was their job to aid poor children in other lands.² Care for the poor just doesn't seem to be that big a deal for a lot of people.

We can understand why. The Sunday school picture of Ruth may have portrayed a beautiful, courageous, and humble woman. But many of the poor are not attractive. They are pushy; they smell bad; they have too many children; they use their money for drugs or booze. You help them get a job and they don't show up on time. They don't say thank-you.

So we find ourselves talking about helping the “deserving poor.” We'll give to the ones who are properly grateful, the ones who use what we give them for the right things and not for lottery tickets, the ones who show some pluck and initiative and spizzerinctum.

The only thing is, the phrase “deserving poor,” doesn't appear in the Bible. It doesn't say in the Bible anything like—help the poor person who does right with your money; give to the one who doesn't use it for booze; help the people who help themselves. The Bible doesn't put any conditions like that on the help of the poor. The Bible says: Care for the poor.

² “Fast Food Over Poor.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 20, 2003, p. 12.

And it says it a lot. We modern-day Christians may spend a lot of our time arguing about issues of sexuality or abortion or similar concerns. But the scriptures speak time and time again about helping those in need:

Here is Deuteronomy: “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

Proverbs: Whoever is kind to the poor gives to the Lord.

Zechariah: Render true judgments, show kindness to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, or the poor.

James: 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.³

As people of faith, we don't give only to those who deserve it. We simply give. It's a part of our faith. Here is how one of the statements in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions puts it:

A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence, makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.⁴

A program on TV told about a new industry that is growing up in our country—consultants to the newly rich. It seems that there is a growing number of multi-millionaires and even billionaires in this country, and they need help in figuring out how to spend their money. So these consultants study up on how to buy the best yacht, what sort of wines to put in you wine cellar, where to spend the best vacation. There was not the first mention that these consultants might advise people to give some of their new wealth away to help other people.

Of course there are people of wealth who do in fact give generously to causes to help other people. But this TV show totally ignored all that. It seemed to say that the only way to be rich is to buy a lot of stuff. To be rich means to have a lot of things.

³ Deuteronomy 15:11, Proverbs 19:17, Zechariah 7:8, James 2:5-6.

⁴ The Confession of 1967, 9.46.

I read that we are becoming increasingly a nation of poor at one end and rich at the other, and not as many in the middle. That, if true, is cause for concern. The philosopher John Rawls said that “the best measure of a just society is whether you’d be willing to be thrown into it at random.”⁵ I’m not sure I’d be willing just to land anywhere in our society. I’d prefer the French Quarter in New Orleans, even after Katrina, but not the 9th ward of that city, before or after the hurricane; the island of Manhattan in New York, but not the south Bronx; even lots of neighborhoods on the western side of Columbia, Tennessee, but not as many down to the east of Carmack.

Israel was commanded to leave the gleanings of the field for the poor. What do we leave for the poor? Why help the poor?

We help the poor because they are blessed. Jesus said so: “Blessed are the poor.”⁶ They are blessed, not because they are poor, but because God’s kingdom is near, and in that kingdom there will be no distinctions between rich and poor.

We help the poor because they bless us. You read the gospels, and discover that it was the poor who understood and responded to Jesus, which the rich went empty away. “How hard it is,” said Jesus, “for one with riches to enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁷ John Calvin says that Christian freedom means being “indifferent” to material things.⁸ We need the poor to help set us free from our stuff. We help the poor because they bless us.

We help the poor because on the day of judgment, God will inquire of us how we helped the least of these. And then our riches or lack thereof will be no help. You heard of the two people standing on the corner watching the funeral procession go by. The one in the hearse was known to be a person of considerable means. One onlooker asked the other: “How much did he leave?” The other replied: “He left it all.” Our riches will not count on that day. Then we will only be able to ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or in need . . .”

We help the poor because Jesus did. They came to him: lepers, the lame, the blind, the powerless. Children instinctively understood that here was an adult who welcomed them. Karl Barth says: “Almost to the point of prejudice, Jesus ignored all those who were high

⁵*The New Yorker*, April 5, 2004, p. 45.

⁶ Luke 6:20.

⁷ Mark 10:23.

⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III xix 7.

and mighty and wealthy in the world in favor of the weak and meek and lowly.”⁹
We help the poor because Jesus did, and Jesus is our Lord.

The story is told of an old rabbi who was traveling down the road with his disciples. They were down to one coin in their common purse. But when a grumpy beggar asked for alms, the rabbi gave him the last coin. The rabbi’s disciples were astonished. “Why did you give our last coin to such an undeserving fellow?” they asked. The rabbi replied: “Do I dare be any choosier than God was when God gave to me?”¹⁰✠

⁹ *Church Dogmatics* IV 2, p. 168.

¹⁰ Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, p. 100.