



Devotional Resource on Poverty

BACKGROUND

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus reads these words from Isaiah as he begins his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4.18-19, quoting Isaiah 61.1). After reading these words, Jesus responds: "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21). This launched for what would be, in Luke's Gospel, the focus of Jesus' ministry: to preach to the outsiders and outcasts, those for whom society had neglected yet those whom God still called God's own sons and daughters. In fact, early in Luke's Gospel we find Jesus among the poor and marginalized of society: an outsider from Galilee, born in a stable, and visited by shepherds.

Today, and in a society with much affluence, it is difficult to imagine the poor, especially the severely impoverished. But, the poor are still with us and the poor still need good news both from the freeing power of the Gospel and in the freeing power of being released from their poverty. God's love compels us to express love for one another. As members of the Body of Christ, we can be witnesses of this Gospel of love to bring good news to the poor by being stewards of that with which God has blessed us.

This study will focus on poverty and justice by looking at Scripture and the attention given to the poor and needy.

OPENING

To begin, you may want to lead your group in reading responsively Psalm 82.

Do you know any people personally who have felt *real* hunger? Not simply the occasional hunger that occurs when we skip a meal or two, but rather people who have experienced *lasting* hunger pangs? Have you ever felt *real* hunger? Discuss how this made you feel physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

LOOKING AT SCRIPTURE

Although both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament contain many readings about the poor, this study will limit itself to a few passages. However, at the end of this study, there are additional passages that may be used for personal or group reflection and discussion. This is particularly useful if you plan to dedicate more than one meeting on this topic. For the passages discussed in the group, ask for volunteers to read the verses. If none are found, read the passages yourself.

1. Read Lev 19.9-10 (leave gleanings for poor people). Say: This may not be a common example for our society, but how does this speak to us in our situation today? In what ways can we "leave gleanings" for the poor? Allow discussion and encourage modern ways in which we can "leave gleanings" today.
2. Read Amos 8.4-8 (poor people are bought for a pair of sandals). Say: Looking again at v. 6, how do we "buy the poor...and the needy" today? Are low wages, inadequate health care, and substandard housing modern ways that we "buy the needy for a pair of sandals"? Why or why not?
3. Read Luke 14.12-14 (invite poor people to your dinner). Say: How do you feel about these verses, especially when Jesus says to "invite the poor because they cannot repay you"? Are there ways you or your church can "invite the poor" to dinner, especially the poor who cannot repay you?

4. Luke 4:16-21 (Jesus sent to bring good news to the poor). Ultimately, it is not our “good works of helping the poor” that makes us right with God. This passage from Luke places that burden upon God’s Son, who himself came to fulfill all that we could not. Jesus’ example in how he relates to the poor is one to follow. Remind your hearers that this should bring them comfort, not guilt, and with this comfort comes the promise that it is God who is at work in us when we are doing God’s work in our own way of “bringing good news to the poor.” Engage your class in a dialogue of the closing words we use to end the Liturgy: “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.” In what ways can we “serve the Lord” by helping the poor, the widow, the orphan, the outcast?

CONCLUSION

What can we do as a Church and as citizens of a wealthy nation to alleviate hunger here and abroad? What other things can we do for the larger underlying problem of ongoing poverty?

The following prayer may be used to conclude your study:

Almighty and most merciful God, we call to mind before you all those whom it would be easy to forget: the homeless, the destitute, the sick, the aged, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Prayer for “The Poor and the Neglected,” LBW, p. 44)

You may also read responsively Psalm 72 (verse 20 may be eliminated) as you close your time together.

Following are additional passages for discussion

Exod 16.1-30 – Trust God to provide our needs
Deut 15.1-11 – Sabbatical year and remission of debts
Prov 21.13 – Listen to the cry of poor people
Jer 22.3 – God commands the king to act with justice
Mic 6.6-8 – What God truly requires
Matt 6.25-34 – First seek God
Matt 23.23 – Woe to Scribes and Pharisees who neglect justice
Matt 25.31-46 – “I was hungry and you gave me food”
Mark 6.30-44 – Feeding the five thousand
Mark 10.17-22 – The man with many possessions
Mark 12.28-34 – The great commandment
Luke 10.25-37 – Parable of the Good Samaritan
Luke 16.19-31 – The rich man and Lazarus
Luke 19.1-10 – Jesus and Zacchaeus, the tax collector

For more information, especially to find ways in which you can get involved in advocacy at the local and national level, please visit www.elca.org/advocacy.