

**Augustana Lutheran Church – Sermon September 30, 2007**  
**A Challenge for Living in a Land of Plenty**

Wow what a difficult message to hear. It's enough to make most of us want to 'call it a day' and just get up and go home. We don't like to hear the message the scripture lessons have for us today. Amos says, "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches." Sounds like something bad is going to happen!

Timothy warns, "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith." ... "As for those who are rich, ...command them not to be haughty." They are to set their hopes on God and are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share."

And the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus really turns everything upside down. In life, the rich man feasted sumptuously every day while Lazarus, living in utter poverty, lies outside the rich man's gate in squalor groveling to eat from the trash thrown over the wall. After death everything changed. Lazarus was carried away to be with father Abraham and the rich man ended up in Hades where he was being tormented. Even after death the rich man didn't get it. He still wanted Lazarus to be sent as an errand boy to cool his tongue and to warn his brothers about the dangers of riches and neglect of the poor. Did you notice it was still only the rich man's family about whom he had any care. He didn't ask that Lazarus warn anyone else.

Jesus has a special message for the Pharisees in this parable. Drawing from select passages in the Torah, the Pharisees followed the Deuteronomic idea that the rich and powerful in this life have attained their stature and success as a direct result of their favor with God, while the poor and those who suffer are the subjects of God's punishment. Even some of us here today may have at some point in our lives made comments such as, "If those people are poor and hungry, it's their fault. This country provides them with every opportunity. They must be lazy, not want to work, or just made very bad choices. It's not my problem. I've worked hard for what I have."

Jesus represents a different reading of the Law ("Moses" in this parable) and the prophets. His teaching flows directly from the conviction that at the heart of the scriptures is a covenantal obligation to care for the poor and dispossessed. The Pharisees had not listened to the Law and prophets.

In this parable, father Abraham refused to send anybody back from the dead to warn the brothers, but by telling the parable, Jesus has warned us. Jesus reminds us of a just God whose nature is to turn the tables on injustice, a God who extends no mercy to those who themselves extend no mercy.

If I asked all of you that considered yourself rich in this world to stand up, I wonder how many would do so. A global study reveals an overwhelming wealth gap, with the world's three richest people having more money than the poorest 48 nations combined. The richest 2% of the world's population owns more than half of the world's household wealth. For the first time, personal wealth, not income, has been measured around the world. The research indicates that assets of just \$2,200 per adult place a household in the top half of the world's wealthiest. To be among the richest 10% of adults in the world, just \$61,000 in assets is needed. If you have more than \$500,000, you're part of the richest 1%. Only 37 million people now belong in that category. Yet half the world, nearly 3 billion people, lives on less than \$2 a day. What would Jesus say?

A man spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. The Lord said to the man, "Come, I will show you hell." They entered a room where a group of people sat around a huge pot of stew. Everyone was famished, desperate and starving. Each held a spoon that reached the pot, but each spoon had a handle so much longer than their own arm that it could not be used to get the stew into their own mouths. The suffering was terrible.

"Come, now I will show you heaven," the Lord said after a while. They entered another room, identical to the first – the pot of stew, the group of people, the same long-handled spoons. But there everyone was happy and well-nourished.

"I don't understand," said the man. "Why are they happy here when they were so miserable in the other room and everything was the same?"

The Lord smiled. "Ah, it is simple," he said. "Here they have learned to feed each other."

This is Outreach Sunday. We are awash with opportunities to feed each other, Habitat for Humanity, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Metro CareRing, the Denver Rescue Mission, global missions, Four Mile Family Resource Center, Lutheran Family Services, ministry to seniors, New Beginnings Church at the prison, the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, the ministry of advocacy, and many more opportunities than can be listed here. The need is great. An estimated 180,000 children in Colorado are uninsured and 479,000 Coloradans have difficulty putting a meal on the table. Colorado has the third largest increase in the country in food insecurity. Since 2001, Colorado's family poverty rate has experienced a significant increase. Between 2005 and 2006 median household income has decreased slightly. In the United States, 35 million people live in households that face a constant struggle against hunger and 47 million people are without health insurance. For the past three years, both men and women's earning have declined. It is true that nationally poverty declined between 2005 and 2006, a very good thing. However, 2006 is the first time on record that, five years after a recession, poverty remains higher than it was during the recession. To top it off, 13 homeless youth die every day. Yes, we DO have a lot of work to do!

Kay and Ken Madsen have spear headed the Outreach Sunday effort. They are both very involved in the community working hard to address the needs of vulnerable populations.

A few weeks ago I asked Kay what motivated her to get involved in caring for the least of these. She shared this story with me. One summer in the late 1950s when she was about 12, she took a bus trip with her grandmother from southern Texas to Key West, Florida. While passing through a rural area in Louisiana, they came upon an African American woman standing at the end of a dirt road with her two small children. She appeared to be 7 or 8 months pregnant. The day was extremely hot and there was no shade. There wasn't even a house near by. She had several large parcels with her. The driver stopped the bus to pick her up. He looked back – the last four rows where blacks were allowed to sit were occupied. The rest of the bus was empty except for Kay and her grandmother. The driver leaned out the window and told the woman she would have to wait for the next bus. There was no room for her and her children. The next bus was scheduled for several hours. The little family was left just standing there in the unforgiving heat. This was Kay's first experience with discrimination and injustice, but the image never left her. It has continued to inspire her to do volunteer work with those in need in the various communities where she has lived.

We all have stories. Things that have happened in our lives that have made us the people we are. I have a story too:

I grew up in a wonderful family. My family was very involved in Bethlehem Lutheran church and the community in which we lived – Joliet, Illinois. The Lutherans sponsored an orphanage in my hometown, the children's home as we called it. Each Christmas a group to which my parents belonged held a Christmas party for the kids. The food was plentiful; Santa came with gifts for all the children at the home. They had a great time opening presents, hearing stories, and playing games. And so **I learned** at a very young age that the gifts weren't always for me. Sometimes the gifts were for others. That it was important to give, and not always be on the receiving end.

My dad participated in a civic club that sponsored trips to the Brookfield zoo near Chicago for low-income children. Each year my mom would drive a group of kids to the zoo, and I got to go along. And so **I learned** that all people are of value no matter what their economic status or the color of their skin.

I attended that Swedish Lutheran College in the Midwest called Augustana. While there I took two courses that had a particularly lasting impact on my orientation to life. One was a course in government, and the other was entitled "Christian Life and the Social Dilemma." I learned that as important and necessary as voluntary service was in meeting people's needs, it would never be adequate to address the systemic problems that kept people poor.

And so as I moved into adulthood and became a parent, I joined the League of Women Voters where I worked on Children's Issues, and volunteered on Fridays at a Head Start program at the Denver Inner City Parish. I played my guitar and sang with the kids from the Hispanic community. My daughter, Carlene came with me. As she got a bit older, I enrolled her in a preschool nearer my home where she could attend three days a week. One day she came to me and asked, "Mom when can I go back to that place with the pink

windows and blue doors where the ‘nice kids are’. I sort of scratched my head. At first I didn’t know what she was talking about, but then I remembered, “The Inner City Parish”.

When my children entered elementary school, I volunteered in their school working with kids with learning disabilities, and participated in the leadership of the Parent Teacher Organization as well. I also became involved on the synodical level of Lutheran Church Women, the precursor of Women of the ELCA.

My work with the “League of Women Voters” led to an appointment to the advisory committee to the Maternal and Child Health Division of the Colorado State Department of Health. As chair, I testified before the health committee of the Colorado State Legislature at a special hearing on children’s health. When the Lutheran Church in America began to establish state public policy offices in the early to mid 1980s, I was given the opportunity to give birth to the Colorado office. I had wondered for some time what I wanted to do when I grew up. I had finally found it. I had discovered that if I could influence policy that affected vulnerable populations, I could help hundreds and thousands of people have a better life, instead just a few. Advocacy became a part of my heart and soul. I expect it will always be so. My modes operande has been for as long as I can remember - family, church, community, and the world. The Lord God has taught me about giving, respect, corporate sin, and biblical justice.

What is your story? Please share it with me sometime.

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between two “wolves” inside us all.

One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Story of Mr. Concepcion:

Now that’s gospel! That’s what we celebrate every Sunday. That’s the ground of our devotion and hope. Thank goodness we have a forgiving Lord in Jesus, the Christ, who in spite of our continuing sin forgives us. Thanks be to God!