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## Bread for the World<sup>i</sup>

Matt. 25:31-40

Oct. 19, 2008

When I was 14 yrs. old, a number of my friends from Jr. High School Spanish Class and I were fortunate to spend the summer in Sincelejo, Colombia as the first exchange students on our brand new sister city program. While there we went to school most week days and were under the supervision of a Peace Corp. worker by the name of Nick Mansito.

My experiences in Colombia were not only educational. In often violent ways a veil of innocence was ripped from before my eyes. The disparity between the few rich and the masses of desperately poor was thrown before us in ways that threatened to overwhelm us.

Walking back from school one day I found on the side walk a small crowd of people gathered around the body of a poor man who had been a regular beggar on the streets in that part of town. There he was, just dead on the street where he'd lived day and night. No one to pick him up. No one to care.

We exchange students lived in the homes of the wealthy. I was in the home of a physician, his wife, two children, and 4 full time servants. Our

backyard was walled in concrete blocks 12-14 ft. high with sharp, broken shards of glass cemented ominously on the top to keep robbers from scaling the walls to raid this rich home.

One day Nick arranged for us to take an educational trip to a finca, farm, owned by one of our hosts that was beside the sea coast. We traveled in a caravan of big American cars on these dirt and gravel roads. On the way, Nick had arranged for us to be the guests of honor at a little ceremony held in a village that thanks to the largesse of some American Christians had made the final arrangements to get their first electrified circuits. We were gathered in a large community hut waiting. And with a burst of joy the villagers welcomed the dead glass globe becoming their first electric light in the village. I took a photograph of that moment that still brings back that whole day for me.

But there was one other part of the day that rocked me to the core. As we climbed back into our cars and continued towards the finca, moving at about 30 miles an hour over a dirt road that had become mildly muddy in the morning's rain, I happened to look out the backseat window of the Ford LTD we were cruising in and for just a moment spotted a little girl of about 5 years old who had come to the doorway of the hut her family lived in. The dirt floor and lack of nearby water source explained why she was so dirty and her hair so scraggly. She had the distended belly of those who we had learned were far along the process of starving to death. There was no pleading in eyes, no anger at the cars speeding by. There was nothing in her eyes, just the vacant stare of one who was evaporating.

And all in that same moment there was a coalescing of the pain, and the poverty we had been witnessing, and the flies on everything, the vultures constant circling, the foreboding of death in so many ways.

But in addition to all those in that one moment of seeing this little girl there was some inexplicable, strong connection in my mind and spirit between her and my own 5 year old sister, Becky, back in Florida. My Becky was beautiful, healthy, bright, well-fed, full of life, and with a bright future. This little girl before, through no fault of her own was at the other extreme. And the two little girls in my 14 year old mind might just as well have traded places. There was no virtue, no fault that blessed one and cursed the other.

My heart was breaking in the moment with a compassion that seemed to fill my vision. I felt a powerful need to make things better for that little girl, and the millions like her. A couple of years later when I became a Christian, I came to understand that the compassion that I had been feeling was a gift from the Spirit of God that binds all humanity together.

Today we learn that more than 854 million people in the world go hungry.

In developing countries nearly 16 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes. Sixty percent of these deaths are from hunger and malnutrition.

In the United States 11.7 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet.

That means something like one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger.

Facts and figures like these are often so large that they become difficult to comprehend. But let me stress two of those facts: 16 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes. Sixty percent of these deaths are from hunger and malnutrition.

These are children with as much potential as Becky. These are children as special and as beloved by God as Meg or Claire or Danielle, or any other child in this church, in our families, or in our schools.

As Christians, as our passage from Matthew today reminds us, we have a special responsibility to care for those most in need, and that means to work towards the elimination of hunger and poverty. Read your Bible. Throughout you'll hear God's call for us to create a more just world where hunger and poverty are eliminated. Jesus calls this new world where justice and compassion rule, the Kingdom of God.

Over 30 years ago, a young Lutheran pastor named Art Simon realized that his church and the other churches on the lower east side of Manhattan were handing out food year after year, and the problem of hunger never seemed to go away. He gathered a group of church leaders, Protestant and Catholic, who came together with the bold vision of changing the things that made people hungry in the first place. They realized that all the charity from all the churches in the country could be completely wiped out by one act of Congress, cutting food stamps for example. Their vision was that if

there could be a small group of committed Christians in every congressional district, we could stand up for the interests of the poorest of the poor in our country and around the world, people who are so wrapped up in finding their daily bread that they can't possibly do what was and is needed, to persuade our lawmakers to work *for* poor and hungry people, to make ending hunger a national priority. That vision led Art Simon and others to start Bread for the World.

Now, more than thirty years later, Bread for the World is a nationwide Christian citizens' movement against hunger. Our members are people in churches across the country, people who believe that in God's world, no one needs to go hungry. As an organization, Bread for the World has about 55,000 members, including 2500 churches representing 45 different denominations. Every year members send hundreds of thousands of letters asking our members of congress to support legislation that brings hope to hungry people both in this country and overseas. That's why you have a bulletin insert in your bulletin today, urging you to write to both of our Texas senators to urge their cosponsoring of the Global Poverty Act legislation.

Yes, this is advocacy. Faith-based advocacy. Advocacy is necessary because we cannot hope to succeed in pushing back poverty if we simply keep treating the symptoms of the poverty rather than getting down to roots of it. Dorothy Day, that great force of nature for justice in the city, said, "When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. When I ask why people are hungry, they call me a Communist."

I know, some of us have become cynical enough to question the value of that effort. We wonder if we can really make a difference in our giving of money in our writing of letters. Well,:

some of you may remember that in 2001, Congress overwhelmingly adopted Bread for the World's Hunger to Harvest Resolution and authorized more than 300 million dollars in poverty-focused aid for Africa. Our letters helped make that happen.

In 1999 and 2000, Bread for the World played a key leadership role in the Jubilee campaign for debt relief. Because of the money that was freed up, twenty-seven of the world's poorest countries were able to invest more in health care, education, and agricultural development, the things they need to become self-sufficient.

More recently, your letters helped win another major victory – Congress authorized the Millennium Challenge Account, with the largest increase in poverty focused development assistance in 20 years. That's something to celebrate. <sup>ii</sup> Your bulletin insert provides even more stories of successes.

Sisters and brothers, Hunger is a problem that, by God's grace, we can solve. Worldwide, hunger has actually decreased by about 20 percent in the past 30 years. I believe that God has given us the means to end hunger in the next 30 years. But churches and charities cannot do it alone. Governments have to do their part too. And we, as citizens of the United States, are blessed with a voice in our nation's decisions.

This year, you can add your voice to the growing movement to eliminate hunger and extreme poverty throughout the world, to provide, as Jesus taught us, for "the least of these...."

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