

***“How Long Must We Sing This Song?”***  
**Psalm 94**  
**April 18, 2010**

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**Third Sunday in Eastertide**

Imagine what life looks like for a third of Earth’s population enslaved by poverty. Robert Heilbroner, a prominent U.S. economist, has itemized the luxuries most U.S. citizens would have to abandon if they were to adopt the life-style of that third of the world, which lives on less than \$2.00/day:

“We begin by invading the house of our imaginary American family to strip it of its furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, television set, lamps. The family is left with a few old blankets, a kitchen table, a wooden chair. Along with the bureaus go the clothes. Each member of the family may keep in his "wardrobe" his oldest suit or dress, a shirt or blouse, a pair of shoes for the head of the family, but none for the wife or children.

“Then the kitchen. The appliances are already gone, so we turn to the cupboards. The box of matches may stay, a small bag of flour, some sugar, and salt. A few moldy potatoes, already in the garbage can, must be hastily rescued; they will provide much of tonight's meal. We will leave a handful of onions, and a dish of dried beans. All the rest we take away: the meat, the fresh vegetables, the canned goods, the crackers and the candy.

“Now we [strip] the [rest of the] house: the bathroom [is] dismantled, the running water shut off, the electric wires taken out. Next we take away the house. The family can move to the tool shed.

“Communications must go next. No more newspapers, magazines, books—not that they are missed, since we must take away our family's literacy as well. Instead, in our shantytown we will allow one radio. . . .

“Now government services must go. No more postal carrier, no more firefighters. There is a school, but it is three miles away and consists of two classrooms. There are, of course, no hospitals or doctors nearby. The nearest clinic is ten miles away and is tended by a midwife. It can be reached by bicycle, provided that the family has a bicycle, which is unlikely.

Finally, money! We will allow our family \$5. This will prevent our breadwinner from experiencing the tragedy of an Iranian peasant who went blind because he could not raise the \$3.94, which he mistakenly thought he needed to receive admission to a hospital where he could have been cured.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, none of us would trade places with these folks.

And yet, I invite us to imagine this scenario in order to ask: What is our responsibility in the face of so much global poverty and the general acknowledgement in our own country of a widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots? This is a question Bono and his rock group U2, have been asking for years in their song “*Bloody Sunday*.” “*How long must we sing this song?*” “This song” of so much economic injustice in the world! This is not just an academic question Bono poses. It comes from his long collaboration with the likes of Pope John Paul II, Bill Gates, and former

President George W. Bush in seeking the eradication of Third World debt, AIDS, and malaria. “How long?” is a question born of the faith of a rock star nurtured in an Irish Catholic/Anglican household and exposed to stories of human rights abuses from organizations like Amnesty International.

It’s also a question which many scriptures, like Psalm 94 ask: “*O Lord, how long shall the wicked exult?*” Then, of course, there’s Jesus. He was not born to high rank and luxury. If he had, people would have said the world was transformed by wealth. He was not the son of an emperor. If he had, people would have said “How useful it is to be powerful!” Instead, he was born to a poor maiden amidst the humblest, poorest of surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

So, what are we to do to eradicate poverty and hunger too?

The place to start is growing a heart for the poor. Jesus demands it in his Parable of the Last Judgment: “*As you did it to the least of these you did it also to me.*” To ignore the poor is to ignore Jesus! Period. Paragraph!

Yet we know only too well how easy it is to despise the poor. They’re viewed as dirty, shiftless cheaters out to gain the system, and some do! The poor of the Third World are thought of as victims of corrupt governments and perpetual wars. And many are!

Yet, things aren’t always as they seem. When I supervised the food pantry and clothes closet at a Kansas City community center years ago, I discovered that while the poor are not altogether blameless, they suffered

under a Welfare System that kept them and later generations dependent upon government largesse. I learned that many poor wanted to work, but found that full-time minimum wage jobs couldn't offset the costs of paying child-care, transportation, health insurance, work clothing, and a higher percentage of their low-cost Section 8 housing! I came to realize they weren't stupid, just frustrated by a system that made it smarter to remain on welfare rolls. Many of these poor wondered openly, "How long, O Lord? How long?"

Today we middle class Americans are also increasingly asking "How long?" "How long will this recession last? How long will the mortgage crisis last?" "How long will high unemployment last?" Until we recognize we are living under a tax system that rewards the top 1% richest Americans with 40-43% of the nation's wealth, we cannot understand our predicament and the need for increased economic balance. Never has this nation escaped a recession when the richest 1% of Americans possessed more than 35% of the nation's wealth. This is not about supporting or denying any specific economic philosophy, but ensuring the basic human value of economic fairness.

Perhaps this can help us better understand how the rest of the world feels towards our country. Though we compose less than 5% of the world's population, we consume nearly 20% of its wealth. "Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half the world does on all goods."<sup>3</sup> As we

get in touch with economic inequalities in our own society, we can begin to appreciate the global economic inequalities which leave 1/3 of the world's population poor. We can begin to realize that as important as band-aid measures are in fighting poverty, through our Week of Compassion Offering, our Pastor's Discretionary Fund and Urban Poverty Day of Action, we need to recognize that fighting poverty also requires changing systems and policies which keep the poor of the world locked in place.

It would also help us recognize that we can fight poverty by learning how to live on less. Philip Yancey, the renowned Mennonite scholar tells this story: "I've become more convinced than ever that God finds ways to communicate with those who truly seek him, especially when we lower the volume of the surrounding static. I remember reading the account of a spiritual seeker who interrupted a busy life to spend a few days in a monastery. 'I hope your stay is a blessed one,' said the monk who showed the visitor to his cell. 'If you need anything, let us know, and we'll teach you how to live without it'."<sup>4</sup>

What is needed to address Christ's demands for economic equality is more than an Investment Policy. What's also needed is a Divestment Policy, taking an inventory of what truly counts to God and what we need to dispose of. Former ambassador for humanitarian issues on the global food crisis, Tony Hall, records, "There's over 2,500 verses in the Bible that deal with

the issue of helping the poor, the sick, the hungry. God set it up that we are to address this issue and that God works through us. God's Plan B? Well, I don't know what Plan B is. Plan A is the way he set it up"<sup>5</sup>

Two weeks ago on Easter Sunday I said that Easter is God's 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Creation, the inauguration of God's new eon, in which God's values aren't just for the life to come, life after death, but for this life, this time, this place. As German Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "The Old Testament insists on justice being done now, as if there were no afterlife."<sup>6</sup>

This is what our text means today. The hymn says, "*This is My Father's World.*" God will not be mocked by human beings, nations, or civilizations which ignore and hurt the poor in order to let the super-rich and wealthy nations keep the spoils. After all, such persons never ask, "How long, O Lord, before you clean up this mess?" They are too invested in their own world, not "My Father's World." They are too blinded by their wealth to acknowledge the world's true owner. But this is what God promised when Revelation foretells "*a new heaven **and** a new earth.*" This is what the Psalmist knew as he spoke of God's ultimate victory saying, "*The Lord will never reject or desert his precious people. Rest assured justice is on its way and every good heart put right.*" This is more than a promise. This is a certainty. God will get God's way. When it happens, after it happens, no one will ever again have to sing, "How long must we sing this song?"

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<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Great Ascent: The struggle for Economic Development in Our Time*, NY: Harper & Row, 1963, pp. 33-36 as cited in Richard Sider's, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 12 & found in *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword: Poverty.

<sup>2</sup>This is a loose translation from Theodotus of Ancyra, a martyred saint from the 4<sup>th</sup> century as found in "The Reason For Jesus Poverty" as found in *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword, Poverty.

<sup>3</sup>Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, Zondervan Press, 2008, pp. 122-123.

<sup>4</sup>Phillip Yancey, "What 147 Elk Taught Me About Prayer," *Christianity Today*, March 2006.

<sup>5</sup>From Ted Olsen's "Quotation Marks," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (7-9-08).

<sup>6</sup>William A. Barclay Commentaries, *Psalms*, p. 105.