

Last week in worship, we talked about human sexuality. This week, we're going to talk about poverty. I know. It doesn't get the headlines, doesn't generate as much heat, but if you listen to Jesus in the Gospels, you're going to hear a lot more about the poor than about what's going on behind the bedroom door. We should really listen more to Jesus, but most of us get our Christianity from the letters of Paul. I like Paul, but I do have one beef with him: he almost completely ignores what Jesus himself said about why he came: to proclaim good news to the poor. [Luke 4:18] Paul forgets, but James remembers.

The Letter of James raises the question: are we good news for the poor? For starters, how do we welcome the poor when they come into our assembly? Now, if the assembly we're talking about is the U.S. Congress, the poor wouldn't get much of a welcome, would they? The ones with gold rings and fine

clothes would be offered seats, because they paid for them! But the poor people in dirty clothes would have to sit in the balcony, if they were allowed in the door at all. And from the balcony, they would hear politicians tell them that they are lazy, they are leeches on society, they don't want to work, all they want is a handout. And then the poor would watch those politicians vote to cut food stamps for millions of people.

I'm afraid that's how it works in the kingdoms of this world. But that's not how it works in the kingdom of God, or in the church, which is supposed to be the beta version of that kingdom.

How do we welcome the poor into the church? I know what welcoming the poor looked like in Santa Cruz. We rented our education building to a drop-in day center for mental health clients five days a week. That meant that we had homeless, mentally ill people living on our property, sleeping in their cars, pretty much seven days a week. We never called the police. On

Sunday mornings, we'd open the doors, and they would sometimes come in for warmth and a cup of coffee, and we'd invite them to stay for worship.

I know what welcoming the poor looked like in Novato. I lived in the little parsonage on the property of the church, and the folks who were living on the edge knew where to find me. Paris would knock on my door at 9 o'clock at night because her boyfriend had kicked her out on the street again. Terry would show up during the day needing gas or groceries. I sometimes got annoyed at these men and women for interrupting me in the middle of making dinner, but I'm very glad about one thing: my daughter grew up seeing her mom letting the poor come to her door.

That doesn't happen anymore. And I'm having a little trouble figuring out how to welcome the poor in Willow Glen. They are certainly around and there are lots more of them, but

I feel farther away from them here than I did in Novato, and I don't feel good about it.

I'm always thinking, what would Jesus do? Well, Jesus would go to them and feed them, forgive them, heal them, bless them and warn us not to ignore them. He would invite them. Jesus once said that if you're going to give a luncheon or a dinner, don't invite your friends, your family, and your rich neighbors, expecting them to invite you in return. No, when you give a banquet, invite the poor and anyone else who can't repay you. You will be blessed and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. [Luke 14:12-14]

But how do we welcome the poor if we're not giving a banquet today? Maybe Pope Francis can show us the way. Francis: what a breath of fresh air! What a welcome change from the recent past! The new pope almost makes me want to be Catholic. I love that he chose the name "Francis" because he wanted to identify with the saint who renounced his wealth in

order to serve God. I love that he isn't living in the papal palace, because it's too isolated, and he wants to be with people. I love that he drives a Ford Focus, not a Mercedes Benz, and cooks his own dinner.

If you think about the vast wealth of the Catholic Church, you might say that these symbolic acts are pretty small, but their impact is huge. Whether he's washing the feet of women at a prison; declaring, "who am I to judge?" when talking about gays who are seeking God; or telling unemployed workers that at the center of the global economy is an idol called money—this pope is sounding more like Jesus every day.

There's a fresh wind of the Spirit blowing through the Catholic Church. And as I reflect upon it, I try to discern what Francis is saying to me about welcoming the poor. First of all, the pope is challenging us to give up some of our comforts and conveniences; they get in the way and we don't really need them. If God had wanted us to live in luxury, God would have

made Larry Ellison pope, but that wasn't in the Plan. God chose Francis because God wants us to know that those little and not so little luxuries will not give us life, but they will take it away. They will dull our sense of being alive and needing one another, and they will deaden our sense of connection with and compassion for the poor. Francis would say that self-denial and sacrifice are good things. A little hardship is a blessing to the heart.

But it's not enough to make a few changes in the material reality we live in. Fundamentally, we have to change the spiritual reality. We have to recognize that we aren't so very different from the very poor. Listen to this snippet of an interview with Pope Francis, recently published in *America Magazine*:

I ask Pope Francis point-blank: “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio [Francis' given name]?” He stares at me in silence. I ask him if I may ask him this question. He nods and replies: “I do not know what might be the most fitting description....I am a sinner. This is the most accurate

definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner." [*America*, September 30, 2013]

Every person, from the poorest of the poor right on up to the pope, is a sinner. At least there is this one thing we all have in common. But there's more. One of the things we have to ask ourselves is "who *is* the poor?" And the answer to that question is something that few of us are ready for. The truth that no one wants to face is that many of us are a paycheck away from poverty. If we didn't have this job or this pension or this social security or this health insurance or this family, we'd be out on the street. The Great Recession taught us one thing: you can lose it all very quickly.

So I believe that one of the biggest reasons that we find it so hard to welcome the poor is that they remind us of what could happen to us. In short, they make us face our fears, and we don't like to do that. We'd rather write some agency a check than have the poor give us a reality check.

But James gives us a very good reason for overcoming our fear and welcoming the poor into our lives. He says that they will enrich our faith, for God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. And they can teach us as no one else can how to put our trust in God.

Whenever I start doubting, I think of the peasant woman I saw crawling on bare knees across the paving stones a hundred yards to the door of the Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City. I didn't know what circumstance brought her to her knees praying, but I had no doubt that God was listening.

When I'm losing strength, I remember the woman I met in a squatters' settlement in Cuernavaca who had given birth to eleven children all by herself (no doctor, no midwife; her husband didn't hang around). She was raising them all by herself in a shack with a dirt floor and a picture of Jesus on the wall. I don't know how she managed to work and watch all those children, but I knew that Jesus was watching her.

When I'm feeling financially strapped and start feeling sorry for myself, I just think of the Haitian woman who worshiped with us at the early service in Novato. Every Sunday morning, Vayola asked us to pray for her to find a job. She'd been out of work a long time. I don't know how she was living, but I do know that she was tithing. Whatever she brought in that week, 10% went in the offering plate. She told me that she had read her Bible, the part in Malachi where it promises that if you bring in the full tithe, God will give you an overflowing blessing [Malachi 3:10]. She believed it and she was waiting for it.

All these women were desperately poor. They had no one to lean on but God, no resources to tap but their faith in God. And until we have met someone who has put their entire life into God's hands, we won't even know how far we have to go and how much we still have to grow.

The poor are folks we need to get to know. So, participate in a "Change the World" weekend. Volunteer at Sacred Heart. Be a tutor at Blackford School. Get trained to serve on Open Table. Plan to go to Mexico in 2015. In the meantime, advocate for affordable housing right here in San Jose. And protest the cuts to the food stamp program.

Whatever you do, be prepared. When you welcome the poor into your life, you will invite discomfort. You will be challenged. You'll have to make some sacrifices. But I promise you that when you face your fears, you will grow in faith. And you will receive a blessing. When Jesus said that we would always have the poor with us [Matthew 26:11], I guess he knew how much we needed them. We still need them to bring the good news to us. We can only pray that God will help us to be good news for them.

Let us pray.

God, you have welcomed us into your heart. You have welcomed us into your grace. And you have welcomed us into your passion for the whole human race. So welcome us into the

service of your kingdom, where we make no distinctions because we are too busy making disciples, and where we especially welcome the poor, because in doing so, we welcome you. Remind us that when we feed someone who is hungry, we feed you. When we shelter someone who is homeless, we make a home for you. When we visit someone who is in prison, we spend time with you. When we arrange medical care for someone who can't pay a doctor, we heal you. When we comfort someone who is lonely, we befriend you. When we carry someone's burden, we carry you. So help us to let go of all of our lesser loves, all the little luxuries that don't lead us to life, and give us a heart to love the poor so that we can learn how to love you. They will teach us that all we need is you. In that hope, we pray. Amen.