



# sermons and liturgy



PRESBYTERIAN COMMITTEE ON THE  
**Self-Development of People**

*People Investing in People*





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## Introduction

This booklet is a thematic collection of sermons and liturgical materials celebrating the ministry of the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People. It is intended, first of all, to provide pastors with materials to help them in their preparation for worship services emphasizing Self-Development of People, especially on Self-Development of People Sunday, celebrated annually during the Lenten season. This booklet also informs the general reader about the Biblical and theological foundations of the Self-Development of People program.

Self-Development of People (SDOP) has been a ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since 1970. SDOP provides funding for local community development efforts that are envisioned by economically poor people who become empowered by controlling their projects themselves, and who directly benefit from their hard work. Since this ministry began, thousands of community groups have entered into successful partnerships with SDOP, both here in the United States and around the world.

Those interested in knowing more about Self-Development are encouraged to explore the SDOP website at [www.pcusa.org/sdop](http://www.pcusa.org/sdop). The site includes examples of SDOP-funded projects and a complete list of free interpretative resources. Pastors may be especially interested in SDOP's annual publication, *Stories That Make A Difference*, which highlights a variety of SDOP projects each year; these stories can be used as bulletin inserts, Minutes for Mission, or as sermon illustrations.

Self-Development of People is primarily funded by the One Great Hour of Sharing, a third of which is received by SDOP. We are grateful to Presbyterian Christians for their financial support, and we hope that this resource will help pastors and church leaders to interpret Self-Development of People to those generous Presbyterians who make it possible for SDOP to enter into life- and community-changing partnerships with economically poor and oppressed people around the world.

The Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

# Calls to Worship

1

**Leader:** We gather here today in the name of God our Creator,  
With hearts full of gratitude for the blessings in our lives;

**People:** Hearts full of thanks for the beauty of God's creation;

**Leader:** Hearts full of grace, bought with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ;

**People:** Hearts full of longing for justice and equality in the world.

**Leader:** We humbly seek hearts full of courage, to work tirelessly for the rights of all people;

**People:** Hearts full of generosity, that we may freely give to those in need;

**Leader:** Hearts full of compassion, to recognize the possibilities within every human being;

**All:** Hearts full of wisdom, guided by the Spirit, as we seek to support the self-development of all people.

2

**Leader:** We are gathered in your presence, God, in the spirit of service and hope.

**People:** We give thanks for your grace that has no limits and your love that knows no boundaries of race, nation, or creed.

**Leader:** Show us your will, Lord, as we live our lives for your glory.

**All:** May our lives be a reflection of your compassion and love for all people.

3

*(For a Self-Development of People service)*

**Leader:** As we gather in God's house on Self-Development of People Sunday, we give thanks for our blessings and for the opportunity to share them in God's name.

**People:** We give thanks for the spirit of generosity and partnership embodied by Self-Development of People

**Leader:** Let us always work for the empowerment of those whose needs are great.

**People:** Wherever there is poverty, hunger, injustice or oppression, we are called to serve.

**Leader:** We pledge to partner with those who seek better lives for themselves, their families and their communities.

**All:** With God's help, we can find ways to make the world a better place for all people.

## 4

"For where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). As we gather for this time of fellowship and worship, let us find our best selves—empowered by the Spirit, let us learn to be patient with one another and to forgive one another. Let us be thankful for God's presence and mindful of our responsibilities as God's servants here on earth.

## 5

*(For a Self-Development of People service)*

God's blessings be with you on this Self-Development of People Sunday.

As we join together in worship and praise, let us reflect on the blessings in our lives.

As we open our hearts to God's message for us today, let us be cleansed of our doubts.

As we quiet our minds, let us hear the voices of the poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged.

As we renew our spirits, let us be faithful servants for justice in the world.

# Invocations

1

God of Love, your compassion extends to all people—the sinful and the devout, the poor and the wealthy, the humble and the powerful. As we gather in Christian love, let us care for one another and work for the empowerment of those within our faith community and in communities of need both near and far. We pray that all may know the justice that flows from your abiding love and the hope that comes from your healing grace. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

2

Mighty God, parent to a borderless creation, light unto a world too often consumed by dark intent, hope for a human spirit that struggles to appreciate the values of justice and righteousness, we come before you, asking your blessing on the work of this community. Strengthen our faith, energize our efforts, make special our joy. Grant that our actions and deliberations be to your glory and to the honor of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

— *The Rev. Curtis A. Kearns, Jr.*  
*Louisville, Kentucky*

3

God of justice and compassion, we come before you this morning in a spirit of gratitude and praise. As we gather in our communities of faith, we give thanks for the gifts of calm hearts and still minds, given to us through the presence of your Holy Spirit, as we hear your message and receive your guidance. Remind us, Lord, of our connectedness and our responsibilities to each other. As we gather in worship, may your divine love inspire us to lead lives of peace and justice, and may your Holy Spirit bring hope and empowerment to communities of need everywhere, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.



# Justice Is a Journey Onward

Jane Parker Huber, 1994

AUSTRIAN HYMN 8.7.8.7 D

Franz Joseph Haydn, 1797

1. Jus - tice is a jour - ney on - ward, up - ward e - ven  
 2. When we hear a cry for jus - tice from the depths  
 3. Em - pa - thy with - out firm ac - tion turns emp - ty  
 4. Jus - tice is a jour - ney on - ward, up - ward, out - ward,

through the pain. Jour - neys have their hills and val - leys;  
 hu - man need, Our re - sponse re - sponse re - sponse re - sponse  
 sen - ti - ment, But the the call puts to love free in ac - tion,  
 spread - ing still. Christ has set us on God's this jour - ney,

still the dreams and goals re - main. We are peo - ple  
 foi - low - ing our de - Sav - ior's lead. Where we see  
 leads to self de - vel - op - ment. When the we see  
 claim - ing us for God's own will. Let us share our  
 op - tures

freed from bond - age by our Mak - er's will and power.  
 pres - sive sys - tems, our peo - ple hun - gry, crushed in by fear,  
 need re - shap - ing, or our neigh - bor is down - cast,  
 neigh - bor's bur - dens far a - way or face to face.

We must now re - spond with ac - tion, in this place and for this hour.  
 We must be the voice of jus - tice, and the hand to help and cheer.  
 Let us seek a bright - er fu - ture, fair - er than the days gone past.  
 So may we, by tak - ing ac - tion, be a part - ner through God's grace.

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# Prayers of Confession

## 1

**Leader:** Jesus Christ, Son of God, you took on human form so as to show us what it is God requires of us: (*Phil. 2:7*)

**People:** To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before You our God. (*Micah 6:3*)

**Leader:** Jesus, you came so that all might have life abundantly; give us the strength to continue Your mission, (*John 10:10*)

**People:** By bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. (*Luke 4:18-19*)

**Leader:** Forgive us, Lord, for not having dealt justly with those who are different, for we are all created in Your image. (*Gen. 1:27*)

**People:** Steer us to seek good and not evil, so that we all may live. (*Amos 5:14-15*)

**Leader:** Forgive us, Lord, for neglecting mercy and not sharing what we have. (*Heb. 13:16*)

**People:** We confess that our selfishness obstructs the flow of Your love, God, to all humankind. (*1 John 3:17*)

**Leader:** From the beginning, Your Word, Lord, has taught us to show justice and mercy towards strangers, outsiders, the neglected and lowly. (*Ex. 22:21-22*)

**People:** Forgive us, Lord, for not being constant advocates for the victims of injustice, oppression and abuse. (*Prov. 31:8-9*)

**Leader:** Awake in us, O Lord, the desire to love others as we love ourselves, so that when Christ comes again, He may not find us sleeping. (*Matt. 22:39*)

**People:** Lord, hear our prayers.

— Joanna Kennedy  
Lincoln, Nebraska

God of Grace,

We confess that there are times when it is difficult for us to think of others, to feel selfless, generous or brave;

Forgive us for the times when we feel helpless, when we fear that nothing we do will help the poverty and oppression that surround us;

Pardon us for the times that our human frailties overwhelm us with doubt and despair.

God our Redeemer,

Restore our faith in You, ourselves, and each other, that we may have the courage to work for change where it is sorely needed;

Fill our spirits with the will and the generosity to give of our time, talents and gifts, in the spirit of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.



# Declarations of Pardon

1

We rejoice in the assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness, which empowers us to live a life of service and meaning. In the spirit of God's love for all people, made manifest through the gift of Jesus Christ, we are partners with those who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged.

2

*(From II Corinthians 5:17-18)*

The Scriptures tell us that in Christ, we are a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new. In Christ, we are forgiven! We are grateful to claim God's promise of new life, and pledge to live as messengers for justice and reconciliation in the world.



# Litanies

## 1

**Leader:** God in Heaven, let us show compassion to those who are in need.

**People:** Show us the way, Lord.

**Leader:** Teach us to speak out where there is injustice.

**People:** Show us the way, Lord.

**Leader:** Lead us to work for the empowerment of those who are oppressed.

**People:** Show us the way, Lord.

**Leader:** Give us the courage to work for peace in a world filled with war and violence.

**People:** Show us the way, Lord.

**Leader:** Help us to offer hope in the face of suffering and despair.

**People:** Lord, we ask for the strength to be your tireless servants for love and freedom in the world.

**All:** We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, the source of our hope, the manifestation of your grace. Amen.

## 2

*(Inspired by I Corinthians 12:12-26)*

**Leader:** Gracious God, we give thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, helper and friend to the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast.

**People:** Let us be the body of Christ in the world.

**Leader:** In your world, God of unity, there are many differences among us, yet through your Spirit we are all baptized into one body, the body of Christ.

**People:** Let us be the body of Christ in the world.

**Leader:** On this Self-Development of People Sunday, we honor all the members of this body as equals, regardless of economic or social status, race, nationality or ethnicity.

**People:** Let us be the body of Christ in the world.

**All:** May we be instruments of your care and compassion in the world, for if any one suffers, we suffer with them, and if any one is honored, we all rejoice.

## 3

**Leader:** Let us pray for those in the world who are suffering, in places nearby and in far-away countries.

**People:** God of mercy, hear our prayers.

**Leader:** For those whose lives were upended by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, who lost family, neighbors, homes, and jobs, and whose futures are still uncertain;

**People:** God of creation, hear our prayers.

**Leader:** For the people of the Dominican Republic, where poverty is widespread and whose citizens long for relief and the opportunity to develop their own solutions;

**People:** God of justice, hear our prayers.

**Leader:** For those challenged by disabilities, illness, injuries, and addiction, for all those who seek comfort and hope in the face of despair;

**People:** God of healing and compassion, hear our prayers.

**Leader:** For the Roma people of Central and Eastern Europe, who face discrimination and lack of opportunity;

**People:** God of empowerment, hear our prayers.

**Leader:** For those in Sudan, Iraq, North Korea, and all places where needs are unimaginably great and sufferings are unspeakable;

**People:** God of peace, hear our prayers.

**All:** God of life, help us to be your messengers for unity and love in all that we do, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

# Pastoral Prayers

## 1

Slow us down, Lord. In this day of super speeds, instant actions and split-second decisions, it's easier to react than to think of reasons and consequences. Slow us down that we may see the faces behind the figures, that we may hear the cries beneath the noise of "busy-ness," that we may feel the anguish and frustration so often masked by the deceptive rituals of survival.

Slow us down, Lord, that our hearts may grow in dedication to the things you have shown us to be good. Let our hearts beat with the determination of Jesus' inexhaustible fortitude; let the warmth of our hearts give us the mercy and compassion that sustained the disciples in faith; let our hearts continually renew our strength through the cleansing power of your Spirit.

Slow us down, Lord, for sometimes our zeal and preoccupation with solutions causes us to lose sight of your purpose and intent. Too often we rush in to help before taking the time to understand; too often we invest without caring; too often we condemn without knowing. Clarify our vision of what can be, and lead us in paths of justice and righteousness to the greater good that is your way. Bless the mission of your church, Lord, and bless those who are involved in that mission. Bless our partnership with the poor, bless our work for peace, bless our fight for justice and the establishment of your kingdom.

Slow us down, Lord, so that as humans we may know we are not the sole reason for creation, so we may live with an awareness of others – other people, other places, other things, for to you alone is the glory, the power, and the dominion forever. Amen.

— *The Rev. Curtis A. Kearns, Jr.*  
*Louisville, Kentucky*

## 2

We are welcomed, O God, at the door of this new day, by your incredible hospitality, and by your mercy and amazing grace that sustains us in ways we cannot begin to fathom and understand. We praise you for the gift of

this day, for the gift of life itself, and for the gift of your Spirit that embodies and empowers and enables us to walk tall and to dream big—to envision new possibilities and do that which otherwise we would not be able to do. Your call, as we know, is not to comfort and ease; indeed, it may be a call to confrontation and to suffering, because old worlds do not die easily. We respond, however, to that one who still and on your behalf, calls from the future, and we know that His words, such as “Take up the Cross” and “Follow Me,” are words of life. Bring us to new awareness, we ask, of those mighty things you are doing in this world we call “ours,” and make us eager to respond to your work in the raising up of peoples today; and so may we work to enhance the self-development of others, experiencing self-development ourselves. Amen.

— *The Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Fisher*  
*Amherst, Massachusetts*

### 3

Almighty God, as we gather in your House on this Lord’s Day, we give thanks for the opportunity to pause and reflect on the blessings in our lives. We give thanks for shelter and food, for family and freedoms, for health and safety. We give thanks for your son Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice gives us the immeasurable riches of new life and eternal grace.

As we worship here today, we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who await peace and prosperity. We ask your comfort for those who are separated from their families and homes by economic necessity, natural disasters, war and violence.

We pray for the strength to serve others and for the empowerment of the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged as they seek better lives for themselves, their families and their communities. Give us courage, for as Christians it is our responsibility to bear witness to the wrongs of this world and never to turn away from those who are suffering. We pray for your wisdom and love to guide us as partners in the self-development of all people. Amen.



# Offering Invitations

1

In 1994, Jane Parker Huber wrote the words to the Self-Development of People hymn, "Justice Is a Journey Onward," for the 25th anniversary of SDOP. The words, "Let us share our neighbors' burdens, far away or face to face. So may we, by taking action, be a partner through God's grace," perfectly describe our Christian responsibility to each other. It is God's plan for us to share our resources in a spirit of partnership and compassion. It is God's plan for us to give freely to others in a spirit of joy, recognizing the image of God and the great potential in every human being. May these words inspire us to "respond with action, in this place, in this hour," as we give thanks to God through our offerings today.

2

*(For a Self-Development of People offering)*

As we pause now to reflect on God's love and blessings in our lives, we give thanks for the opportunity to share our resources as an expression of our gratitude. We are called to love one another through our actions, for the Scriptures challenge us in James 2:14, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" It is God's plan for us as Christians to care for each other, to be responsible for each other, to lift each other up. Our offerings in support of the Self-Development of People assist in the empowerment of those who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged. When we offer these gifts, we are living out God's plan for us to help each other willingly. When we use our offerings to return a sense of hope, pride, and dignity to those held captive by injustice and discrimination, we are living out God's plan for us to respect each other as equals. May God's blessings be upon these offerings as we share them today.

3

We who serve God are called to be disciples, as Jesus tells his followers in John 8:31-32: "...If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." When we know the truth of God's Word, we are moved to share our resources

freely, as a pure expression of our devotion and gratitude to God. Our obligation is deep—we are called not just to do things “for” others, but to work alongside others in partnership and equality. We are called to support efforts whose goals include restoring dignity, empowerment and justice to all people who lack these gifts. As part of our growth in Christian community and discipleship, we learn that we are all responsible for each other. As we offer our gifts and share our resources, may we do so without pity or patronage, but with humility, respect and gratitude. This is the blessing of true freedom in Christ.



# Offertory Prayers

## 1

**Leader:** Ten low caste, untouchable women sit by a roadside in India pounding rocks into gravel to be used in road construction projects. To be able to earn a meager living, they ask the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People to help them purchase hammers, burlap bags to hold the pebbles and wheelbarrows to transport the bags to a road construction site, where they will receive a few pennies for each.

**People:** Loving God, take my offering and use it for your purposes.

**Leader:** In the mountains of Nicaragua, four small rural communities hope to join together to dig a well in each, and to construct a simple dirt road that would enable them to get the produce of their fields to a market. They ask Self-Development of People to provide materials for wells they want to build in order to provide safe drinking water and irrigation for their fields.

**People:** Loving God, take my offering to Nicaragua to provide safe water and nourishing food for your people.

**Leader:** Four years ago, seven impoverished young men in New Orleans asked for and received a Self-Development of People grant to establish themselves in a musical instrument repair business. They received the grant and used it responsibly. Now their business is gone, lost to the waters and winds of Hurricane Katrina.

**People:** Loving God, take my offering to New Orleans to bring life and new hope to your hurting people.

**Leader:** Among the many grandmothers in Africa who are struggling to care for children orphaned by AIDS, a group in Kenya has formed a handcraft cooperative. One of their problems has been getting their products to market, many difficult miles away over nearly impassable roads. If their cooperative had four motor scooters, their products could reach these markets.

**People:** Loving God, take my offering to Kenya to bring life and new hope to your hurting people.

**Leader:** Before the Tsunami of December 2004 struck, a cooperative fishermen's group in Sri Lanka, which had possessed only unsafe, limited-range dugouts, received Presbyterian Self-Development of People funds to purchase safe, efficient boats. These boats, on which they had proudly painted "Self-Development of People," were all wiped out by the Tsunami.

**All:** Loving God, take my offering to Sri Lanka, to Africa, to Central America, to India, to the Carribean, to the U.S. and throughout your world. Use my offering to bring life and new hope to your hurting people. Amen.

— Mary F. Beardall  
Winter Park, Florida

## 2

**Leader:** Loving God, every good and perfect gift comes from you.

**People:** May our offerings today reflect your generosity.

**Leader:** Let us be reminded that our work as your servants is not accomplished merely by monetary gifts, but also through our actions in our daily lives.

**People:** When we listen to each other with open hearts and minds, we give an offering that honors you.

**Leader:** When we work alongside those who need help, we give an offering that praises you.

**People:** When we treat all people equally, regardless of race, ethnicity or economic status, we give an offering that dignifies you.

**Leader:** When, through our gifts, the disadvantaged or disabled are empowered to help themselves in their own way, we give an offering that respects you.

**All:** We ask that you accept these gifts of our offerings and our service, O Lord, along with our gratitude, and use them for the self-development of all people. Amen.

3

Generous God, you have given so freely of your love and blessings. In return, we seek to be generous in our giving and inspired in our actions, through the example of your Son, Jesus Christ. We offer our thanks along with these gifts, and we pray that they may be used in the work of bringing freedom and justice to all people. May our offerings bring empowerment and hope where they are needed most. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

4

*(For a service in which a portion of offerings will be given to Self-Development of People)*

God our provider, as we offer our gifts today for the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People, we give thanks for the blessings in our lives. We pray for those who do not yet know the blessings of justice, freedom or hope. We ask that our offerings may be used to support Self-Development of People's efforts to provide peace, safety, and the resources for empowerment and opportunity to our brothers and sisters who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged, through the love of Christ and the comfort of the Spirit. Amen.

# Prayers for Illumination

1

God of wisdom, in the reading of your Word, we ask for the power of the Spirit to open our hearts and minds to your message of justice for all people. We ask that through the Scriptures, you show us our responsibilities and inspire us to action, by Christ's example. Amen.

2

Prepare our hearts, O Lord, to hear the good news of your Word. May the Holy Spirit fill our souls and teach us to work for justice, supporting the self-development of all people, through the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.



# Scriptures

## GOD HELPS THE OPPRESSED

- ▶ *Exodus 3:1-20;6:3-13* God as liberator; speaks to Moses
- ▶ *Luke 4:18-19* Jesus proclaims mission as liberator
- ▶ *Psalms 72* God will rescue the needy and oppressed from injustice
- ▶ *Isaiah 58:6-12* "...to loose the bonds of injustice...."

## HOPE

- ▶ *Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23* The Beatitudes
- ▶ *Luke 4:18* Bring good news to the poor

## OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SERVE

- ▶ *Micah 6:8* What does God require?
- ▶ *Isaiah 61:1-3* God has anointed me to help
- ▶ *Isaiah 42:1-10* "Bring forth justice to the nations"
- ▶ *Acts 20:17-35* Paul reminds the Ephesians of Jesus' words "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

## LOVE AND COMPASSION FOR EACH OTHER

- ▶ *Luke 10:25-37* The Good Samaritan
- ▶ *John 15:7-17* Love one another
- ▶ *I Corinthians 13* "...the greatest of these is love."

## HUMAN DIGNITY

- ▶ *Genesis 1:27* We are created in God's image
- ▶ *Isaiah 43:1-9* "I have called you by name"
- ▶ *Psalms 139* "I am fearfully and wonderfully made..."
- ▶ *Luke 5:17-21* "...anyone in Christ is a new creature...."

## STEWARDSHIP

- ▶ *Deuteronomy 4:7-11* "If there is among you anyone in need...."
- ▶ *II Corinthians 9:6-15* "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind."

# 1 Love Is a Verb

► **The Rev. Dennie Carcelli**

*The Rev. Dennie Carcelli is currently a Parish Associate at Mt. Baker Park Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. Before her retirement, she served on the Self-Development of People staff for four years as the Partnership Advocate for the West. The unique mission and ministry of SDOP continue to hold a special place in her heart.*



**Scriptures:** Jeremiah 22:1-9; Galatians 5:1, 13-14

**T**hinking about love in the context of our current culture can be rather confusing. What do you make of Paris Hilton's idea of love? What about the TV car commercials that show you how one sight or touch can whisk you off into some fantasy world of pleasure or can bring the perfect mate to your side? I don't know which is more misplaced, the suggestion that I could have a satisfying love affair with a car or with a person who loves me because of my car! Isn't there a song about everybody looking for love in all the wrong places?!

Finding no help from the culture in sorting out the meaning of "love," I decided to see what the dictionary had to say. First, "love" is defined as a noun, with all the expected words about excitement and feelings. You have to sift through a long list of things before you find "love" defined as a verb, and then it is fairly pitiful.

Webster and our culture have it wrong. They think "love" is primarily a mushy, warm feeling about someone or something, but that isn't it! I had to go to one of my favorite theologians for the real definition. Frederick Buechner says, *"In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will."* Love is a verb; it's something we choose to do.

This definition comes right out of Scripture. Today, we heard it first from Jeremiah. He is sent to the king and people of Judah with a pretty heavy message from God. He tells them that their city will be laid waste—made a desert—if they do not keep the covenant, if they aren't faithful in their relationship with God.



And the way to keep covenant is to “do justice and righteousness,” especially towards those who are the most vulnerable in the society—those who have been oppressed, the alien, the orphan, and the widow—those on the margins. It’s not enough to hold the right belief or thinking, you have to *do*. You have to put what you believe into action—*do* justice, deliver from the hands of the oppressor, *do* no wrong or violence. God is essentially saying, *If you create this kind of community, it will be strong and will flourish.*

Then, in our New Testament passage, Paul urges the Galatians to remember that they have been set free from the constraints of the Law by Christ. They/we are still bound by our covenant with God, but set free from the human-made restrictions and regulations that had developed over the centuries. Paul says, *Don’t get all wrapped up in following every detail of religious law, you’ve been freed from that. However, don’t use your freedom to indulge yourselves: don’t get lured off the spiritual track by material goods or other ego desires, (like those TV commercials) and don’t just be looking out for Number One,* he says, but rather, “through love become slaves to one another.” Now there’s an interesting paradox. Use your freedom to become slaves! Then he explains this by repeating Jesus’ teaching that the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Which brings us right back to the Covenant.

Loving your neighbor is at the heart of keeping the Covenant with God, which is to say, doing justice and righteousness is at the heart of keeping the Covenant. It’s like an equation. Keeping the Covenant = (equals) doing justice and righteousness = (equals) loving your neighbor as yourself. They are interchangeable parts. Relationship with God is always communal; it’s never just about “me and Jesus.” The Good News of God’s Love comes to us in community, and our grateful response is to be acted out in and for the community, the family of God.

There are a lot of ways in which we Presbyterians actively “love our neighbors.” Self-Development of People is one of them.

Self-Development is funded through our gifts to the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering each spring. I like to think of that offering as a multi-faceted jewel. One face is Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, another face is the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and another is Self-Development of People (SDOP).

All of the ministries that we fund through our gifts to the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering are very helpful, but Self-Development of People takes love to the next level. It goes beyond the service-oriented kind of love that does something *for* others. It seeks to empower the poor and dispossessed by walking with them, forming a partnership with them, trusting them to decide for themselves what they need, and then helping to connect them with the tools or resources they need to do the job for themselves.

Don't misunderstand me; there is a legitimate need for mission that is service-oriented. When people are hungry, we need to feed them. When there's a disaster, we need to bring help and hope. But if we never move beyond service projects, we run the risk of participating in the very oppression we're trying to alleviate, by keeping people dependent and disempowered.

We church people need to be very careful that we don't fall into the trap of loving the good feelings we get from doing things for others so much, that we keep ourselves in the driver's seat. Because as long as we keep the power in our hands, it is not in the hands of those who need it.

That is why our Self-Development of People Program works differently. SDOP makes grants to community-based groups of people who are poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged, and who have a project that they are going to do *for themselves*. SDOP doesn't specify what kinds of projects they will fund—they give to a wide variety of projects, because they want the group to tell them what *they* have decided is the best way to improve their own situation. All SDOP requires is that the project offers some kind of long-term solution to the problems the group has decided to work on, and that they've thought it through carefully.

Self-Development requires that the group control the project *and* benefit directly from it themselves. They only fund self-help, bootstrap kinds of projects. This is a radical, grassroots kind of community development. It is greatly needed, and we Presbyterians are the only ones doing it in this way. People are often surprised by this. One young man, upon hearing about Self-Development of People said, "Wow, you Presbyterians really are Christians!"

Helping people take charge of their own lives is an act of love, which is an act of power-sharing. Think about this: Love is very powerful, but it can only function by consent. If I force you to do something, you will not

experience that as a loving act. Think about God creating the world out of love and creating humanity with free will. God took a huge risk. That's power-sharing. Love can only function by sharing power, and—listen to this—in doing so, it becomes more powerful. Yes, you heard me right. By giving its power away, love becomes more powerful. That's why God had Jeremiah tell the king to deal justly with his people, because God knows that a country is strengthened when it cares for and empowers its people—all of its people—not just the ones who are already rich and powerful.

Let me show you how this works through Self-Development of People by telling you about some of the projects that SDOP has funded recently.

*(Select two or three SDOP-funded projects from "Stories That Make A Difference" or from the SDOP website [www.pcusa.org/sdop]. Choose a variety of projects; e.g., an economic cooperative, or community-organizing to redress some kind of injustice, or community development; e.g., a water project, community center, or parents organizing to improve conditions for themselves and their children.)*

Things have changed a great deal in our country over the last 60–70 years. In those days, people lived in diverse communities where the well-off and the economically disadvantaged lived on the same street and could help each other out. Now, most Americans live in communities where the people are all alike. We're not just racially divided; we're economically divided, especially in urban areas, so that the poor, the middle class and the wealthy no longer live in the same neighborhoods. We don't know each other, and that creates distance and a lack of trust; but also, there isn't an exchange of information about how to make your way in the world. You would be surprised at how "rich" you are in knowledge, most of which you take for granted, but which could be of great value to someone who hasn't had the chance to learn it.

There are people in our community who are bright and motivated, but who don't know how to open a bank account, or who have no idea how to get access to the things they need from the larger community, or who have an idea about a project that would benefit their neighborhood, but don't know how to make the connections or get the money they need to make it happen. The SDOP Committee tries to bridge that gap, but that small group can't do it all by themselves. They need help from local congregations.

That poses a challenge for us. God is calling us to prayerfully explore ways to use our resources—all of our resources, not just our money—to practice the kind of power-sharing love that Jeremiah and Paul have taught us about today—the kind of resource-sharing and empowering love that Self-Development of People gives to community groups. Let's not leave all the fun to SDOP. We can get in on it too!

In fact, we could use the Self-Development program as a tool for reaching out into the low-income community just outside of our door, by helping to find a group of folks who are sitting around a table somewhere wondering where they could get their hands on some money to help them build or fix or create whatever it is they need. Or we could use the Self-Development model of empowering partnership ourselves with a family or a group of children or teens, or with a low-income racial-ethnic congregation. The possibilities are endless. We could put love in action right here in our neighborhood.

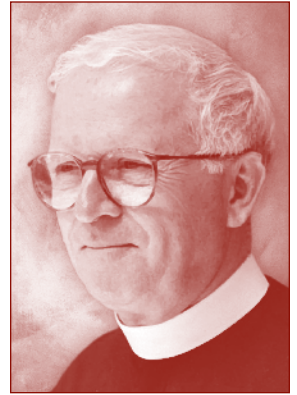
We are all called by God to a ministry of love and empowerment—to use the talents and resources we have been given on behalf of the whole family of God. That's what they are for—to use on behalf of others.

It's a good thing to give money to fund programs that help people. In fact, Self-Development relies on that. But there's a detached quality to that kind of giving. We're over here, they're over there, and there's little or no communication or connection between us. It's also good to do something for folks in need—give them food, clothing, shelter. That kind of mission is badly needed, but again, that tends to be stop-gap kind of help and usually leaves us in a "one up" position. It's important that we go the next step.

If you really want to plug into the power of the Holy Spirit, practice sharing love that empowers others, that creates a partnership of trust and mutual appreciation between you and them, and that shares your resources in a way that lets others stand tall and do for themselves. I promise you, that power will not flow in just one direction. That kind of love is always empowering at both ends of the connection. Thanks be to God! Amen.

# 2 Beyond Charity

▶ **The Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Fisher**



*The Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Fisher, M.Div., S.T.D., has a relationship to SDOP that goes back even beyond its formal beginnings. Wife Clara Joe and he arrived, to study at Union Seminary in New York City, several weeks after James Forman delivered his “Black Manifesto” at Riverside Church, the Summer of 1969. His membership on the National Committee dates from 1982 to 1993.*

*During his years on the committee he served on the West and Northeast Task Forces, and one year as Vice Moderator.*

**Scriptures:** Joshua 5: 9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

**S**everal weeks ago I was exploring with a Jewish friend how the conversation that so desperately (as I view it) needs to be pursued with people from different faith communities might be engaged or begun, and we were wondering together if it might be helpful for people from different faith backgrounds—people who are Buddhist and Hindu, Moslem, Jewish and Christian—to come together and to share, from their several traditions, stories that are important in and to these traditions.

What would Christians have to offer, I asked myself? And I realized rather quickly that it might be the story either of the Good Samaritan or the story of the Prodigal Son. Both of these stories that Jesus told—parables, or pointed, “loaded” stories, stories that get inside you and live with you and won’t go away—have a lot to say about core values and viewpoints that are important to us: about our understanding of who God is, or our experience of God, and our understanding of how God wants us to behave, or what God wants us to be like. We wouldn’t be who we are without these stories. They are an essential part of the conceptual “furniture,” if you will, of our inner lives that inform and shape us. And I realized, as I was preparing my sermon for today, Self-Development of People Sunday, that both of these stories not only pertain, in a powerful way, to who and where we are as individuals, but can help chart a course, somehow, for the future, our future, and for the future of our society and world. Indeed these two stories are perhaps the best stories Jesus, who was a pretty good storyteller, ever

told. They have timeless significance. They embody and represent timeless truth. But only one of them, with other relevant texts, provides a focus for our attention this morning.

So what is it about, this so-called story of the Prodigal Son? It's not only about the process we may need to engage in, or the trip we all probably need to take—in fantasy, in our heads, if not literally and with our feet—in order to grow up and begin to become mature: the journey away from home during the course of which we challenge and call into question and test out our parents' values and usually come to the conclusion that these values are not so bad after all, but something we can in fact buy into and espouse and live with and own. It's not only descriptive of and about the process of growing up, and of coming, over a period of time—perhaps a lifetime—to ever new awareness of who we are and of what we need to be about. It's not just about the danger of not taking this journey, of never reflecting seriously and in an ongoing way on who and where we are and on what we are challenged and called to be about and to do. It's not just about the ongoing influence on us and power over us of perhaps outmoded ideas, and of ways of coping that no longer work, as well as our ongoing resistance to the inner voices of parents, and our ongoing need to revisit how we have been programmed and “brought up” and socialized into adulthood, and “trained.”

This story Jesus tells is not just about the growth work we need to do, or don't do at our peril. The Scribes and Pharisees, “left brained,” linear, literalist folk, were like the elder brother of the tale, but they didn't see themselves in the role. They were too unimaginative and humorless, too culpable to do this. What the story is really about is the power of the patience and persistence (patience can mean persistence) of the parent who doesn't panic, and who waits, and who waits, and who waits (sometimes the waiting game seems to go on forever) non-judgmentally, non-claimatively, and who hopes, and prays powerfully, if not for less spirit, or for more spirit, for at least a happy outcome of the sons' or daughters' strategies and attempts to find happiness and fulfillment in life.

Some have appropriately renamed the story “The Parable of the Prodigal Parent.” And maybe we can see today, when we think in terms of the self-development of people, that this story is really about how to give, or how to give in such a way that another can receive and be grateful, or at least profit from our gift.

This story is a story of the power of what some can see only as passivity, or of love that is passionate in a way not easily understood in or by our pop culture. It's illustrative, even, of Jesus' telling remark as he prepares for his execution: "I lay down my life of my own accord. No one takes it from me." (*John 10:18*) And it details and speaks powerfully to the act of waiting. Significant about the waiting father is the way he waits, and the knowledge the younger son has that whenever he chooses or needs to return home, under whatever circumstance, a party will be thrown. This Prodigal Parent is not like those parents I once knew—who, after their own belated wanderings, have, at this point, I think, probably returned home themselves—those parents who, when their son left home and confessed to being gay, had the locks on the doors of their house re-keyed, and let it be known that their son would never be welcome to return home again.

No one is left out in the story before us, and no one is let off the hook; all sorts of behaviors are called into question and critiqued. And it would be interesting someday to write a sequel to the story and to raise the question: "How does the father react, what does the father do, when the elder brother has an explosive midlife crisis, acts out repressed behaviors, and gets himself into really serious trouble, perhaps even with the law?" Or "What happens the next time the younger son approaches his father and says 'Dad, I'd like to borrow some money. I'd like to take another little trip'?" One wonders, "Are there limits, should there be limits, can there be limits to a parent's generosity?"

The task of parenthood may well be, and probably is indeed the most God-like task to which human beings are called. But maybe the question needs to be shifted and the task—our responsibility—refocused. Maybe Cain's question to God: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Genesis 4:9*) needs to be answered, "No, but that doesn't let me off the hook. I am my sibling's sibling, and furthermore I am in family relationship to and with all people, everywhere. Each woman alive is my sister, even as each man alive is my brother. And each child alive is a child for whom I have, in effect, parental responsibilities, and to whom I am bound or tied." We are responsible to and for one another. And this responsibility is a responsibility we cannot shirk, a responsibility we cannot avoid or escape.

Isn't it strange; isn't it odd, how perfectly good words can get corrupted and come to mean things they didn't originally, and weren't intended to mean? Words like "charity." Our forebears were comfortable for a long time

with the King James rendering of 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Then Lady Bountiful came along, and we became sensitized, in the sixties (if not before) to the difference between the dangers of presumably/essentially well-meaning people who were in a position to help, trying to help people who really needed help, in a way that wasn't all that constructive—i.e., thinking, from their presumably superior, and exterior position, that they knew best what was good for others and trying to do for them in a way that wasn't all that helpful (think urban renewal and all that sort of thing, all of our, I want to believe, well-intended interventionist strategies)—doing to or for others, thinking we knew what was best, and treating symptoms or (in effect) putting band-aids on bleeding sores—and we came in time, perhaps too long a time, to awareness of the difference between claimative and unclaimative love, and to equate love with justice, and with respect for the integrity of another person's analysis of his or her position and needs, and dreams!

Doubtless you are all familiar with the three Greek words for love: "philos," as in "Philadelphia," which translates "brotherly" or "sisterly" love, or friendship as conventionally understood; "eros," as in "erotic," which really means motivated love, or love that requires some beautiful object or worthy goal to activate and turn it on; and "agape," a new word that became part of the Greek language, or that acquired new meaning after the birth of Jesus, that has reference to unmotivated love, or to love for the unlovely, love that loves simply because its nature is to love: love not "because of" or "in order to," but love almost "in spite of." It's this latter sort of love, the love we understand and experience God to be, the love embodied in the Prodigal Father, that informs the Self-Development of People program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What is this program, and what is it about? To begin with, let me simply say this: the Self-Development of People program is a funding program that enters into partnerships with people—investing about 3 million dollars per year. And it's one denomination's response, the Presbyterian Church's response—an oblique response, to be sure, but a response nonetheless—to James Forman's Black Manifesto, delivered, laid on the hearts and consciences of Americans at Riverside Church in New York City on Mother's Day in May of 1969. Forman's Black Manifesto was a demand for reparations for injustices perpetrated on African Americans throughout the history of this country. But perhaps another and better, more contemporaneous, up-



to-date way of thinking about it is as an attempt to incarnate the Gospel and to represent what may be the very “heart” and “soul” of the church: a ministry of empowerment that honors and respects the integrity of the dreams of folks of all sorts who are economically poor, oppressed, and/or disadvantaged. It is also an attempt to help these people achieve such goals as they articulate and set for themselves, especially insofar as these goals seek to influence and alter structures that oppress, especially insofar as these goals can effect systemic change and the empowerment of others.

I alluded a bit earlier, and I hope you caught my allusion, to a favorite hymn for many, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” Are you as uncomfortable as I am with the line in one of the verses that runs, “And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear”? Somehow this seems rather casual, too easy. Where’s the real wrestling, I ask? Where’s the real struggle? Somehow the single “tear” doesn’t seem like quite enough. And the “often” probably ought, for that matter, to be “always.” The attention to others’ needs, the concern for others seems, as alluded to in this hymn, so “other” somehow, so peripheral, so distant, so patronizing and unconcerned. Clearly Jesus’ death on the cross, a consequence of his ongoing challenge to the powers that were, his total commitment to remedying social wrongs and his concern for people who were hurting in all sorts of different ways—that commitment that got him into trouble with the authorities of his day and that can get us into trouble with the authorities of our day—needs to move us, too, beyond an easy “charity” of this sort and into a life posture that is more, dare I say it, sacrificial.

Let me close with a quote from Moses Maimonides, a remarkable Jewish Rabbi, philosopher, and mystic of the 12th century of the Common Era. “There are eight degrees in the giving of ‘zedakah,’ or ‘righteousness,’ or ‘justice,’ or ‘charity,’” he wrote, “each one higher than the next:

- To give grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret,
- To give less than one should, but with grace,
- To give what one should, but only after being asked,
- To give before one is asked,
- To give without knowing who will receive it, although the recipient knows the identity of the giver,
- To give without making known one’s identity,

To give so that neither giver nor receiver knows the identity of the other,

To help another to become self-supporting, by means of a gift, a loan, or by finding employment for the one in need."

(In *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975, p. 15.)

So much of our giving, so much of our doing for others is so results-oriented, so calculating. We tend to give in such a way as to encourage dependence, or to oblige others. Our gifts, as we say, have "strings" attached to them. We need to learn that not all ties that bind are blessed.

The Prodigal Parent, like God, is someone who knows how to give, whose gifts are uncalculating, whose gifts always honor and respect the integrity of other people's inner journeys and lives and strategies and dreams. We need, most of us, to become more like this person, more "prodigal," if you will (the word translates as "recklessly or wastefully extravagant"). We also need to remember, not only that "to give is to receive," but to realize that, in the words of Dag Hammarskjold, "when you have reached a point where you no longer expect a response," only then will you "be able to give in such a way that the other is able to receive, and be grateful." (In *Markings*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, p. 76.) And again Hammarskjold writes "Only what you have given, be it only in the gratitude of acceptance, is salvaged from the nothing which some day will have been your life." (*Ibid*, p. 38.)

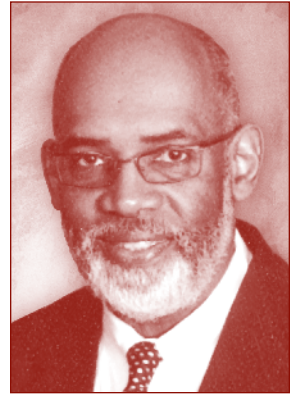
Let us pray:

O God, you comprehend and love me in a respectful, persistent, passionate way. Help me to love others in a similar way. "Fill me with an unwearied, unclaimative love, keen of perception, strong of fiber, that can help others to be their best selves, even as your Son set free in others powers they did not know they had, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.

(from a prayer by L. H. M. Soulsby, included in *Prayers for a New World*, compiled and edited by John Wallace Suter. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, p. 94)

# 3 Acts of the Heart

► **The Rev. Curtis A. Kearns, Jr.**



*The Rev. Curtis A. Kearns, Jr. is Executive Administrator for the General Assembly Council of The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Louisville, Kentucky. He is a former chair of the SDOP National Committee (1991-93) and has served on SDOP committees for National Capital Presbytery and the Synod of Mid-Atlantic.*

**Scripture:** Mark 14: 3-9

**T**his world is filled with many fascinating things, but among the many wonders engineered by humans, none stands out as more magnificent than the pyramids of Egypt. The Great Pyramid is a symbol that stands as an inestimable tribute to an inspirational leader. It is located outside of Cairo and rises some forty stories above the desert terrain that surrounds it. At its base, a single side of its mammoth dimensions measures about the size of two and a half football fields in length. The huge blocks used in the pyramid's construction weigh from about five tons apiece for those along the bottom layers to about a ton apiece for those at the top.

The Great Pyramid is a true testimony to the advanced African civilization that created it. Even today scholars marvel at the geometric perfection that it represents—its angles are true, its foundation perfectly aligned. They marvel at the impeccable design—a room was created at the very center, the innermost point of the pyramid under thousands of pounds of weight. They marvel about its ability to endure in spite of the harsh natural conditions in which it resides. And this is true of something believed to have been created at least four thousand years ago, for its origin is believed to have been sometime around 2700 BC.

This is a marvel you can appreciate even if you have never seen it in person. You don't have to see it to understand what a fascinating and unparalleled wonder it must be and what a source of pride for the African continent where it is located. It's hard to conceive of any type of human construction that could endure for four thousand years; and considering the fact that

we don't think any technology is equal to modern technology, it's rather sobering to realize that nothing that has been recently created has even the slightest chance of lasting that long practically intact.

Can you imagine what the cost of this pyramid must have been, not only in terms of monetary costs, but also in terms of labor, material, and time? The costs must have been simply astounding. It is speculated that its construction must have taken about thirty years, and nobody has any idea how it ever got built. After all, how do you get limestone blocks weighing over one ton forty stories into the air when you have no crane; or even more basic, how do you cut the blocks and how do you transport them where you need them to be? The costs must have been tremendous, and yet today the pyramid stands as a testimony to a people's unwavering dedication to an inspirational leader.

It seems safe to say without fear of contradiction that given the great costs that are evident for such a project, we would not see the modern equivalent of the Great Pyramid being built today. The cost would simply be prohibitive—too great for it to be attempted—because you see, we are a cost-conscious society. Our business orientation causes us to measure value in terms of costs, and if, in making that calculation, the potential value cannot be proved to exceed the costs, the project will probably not be attempted. Too often we measure value first and foremost in terms of costs, and if the potential value cannot be proven in terms of costs, we generally don't do it.

But what happens when either we cannot or when it is not appropriate for us to attach a cost to what we are doing? What happens when it is necessary for us to judge the situation by a measurement other than costs? What happens when we must shed our normal way of looking at things and view them from a different perspective? Well, simply put, we struggle, for it is difficult for us to imagine how anything can be important if its worth cannot be reasonably estimated. The Great Pyramid was built at tremendous costs, but the decision to build it could not be based on the issue of costs alone.

This problem of limiting ourselves and our actions by equating value with costs is a problem continuously encountered in our society, but it is a particular challenge for those of us who are Christians, because we have committed ourselves to be judged by a different standard, and that standard begins and ends with our love for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Too often in our society the good we do is motivated by what it's worth to us or how it benefits us. Too often the sacrifices we make are determined by what they will be worth to us later; too often the services we provide are motivated by what we expect in return. But, for those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior, it should never be a question of costs, because Jesus assumed the costs so that we might know the value of love.

In the fourteenth chapter of Mark beginning at verse three, we are told the story of the "Anointing of Jesus at Bethany." This is an intriguing story for a couple of reasons. First, it is one of only a few stories repeated in all the Gospels. In each of these accounts the actions and reactions of the characters involved are generally the same—the differences being in the details of the situation where the action takes place. The other intriguing thing about this story is that it seems like a role reversal takes place here. Jesus, who in the Scriptures is always portrayed in light of his compassion and concern, is seemingly pictured differently here.

The Jesus we know and experience to be a friend and tireless worker for the poor in this instance is portrayed in a way that makes him appear unconcerned or indifferent. The Jesus we know and experience to be more concerned about others than about himself is here seemingly pictured in a different light, in a way that makes him look selfish and a bit self-centered. The Jesus who, throughout the Scriptures is portrayed as tolerant and understanding, here appears somewhat short-tempered and intolerant. This story is one of the few instances in the Gospels where the image we are given of Jesus differs from what we have come to know about his nature.

In the story Jesus is at a table in the house of Simon the Leper, and while he is sitting there with a group that most likely includes his disciples and other guests, a woman comes up to him with what we are told is a very costly alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard. The woman breaks the jar at some point along its long and slender neck, and having broken it, she pours the rich ointment over his head.

This appears to be a spontaneous act of adoration. For this woman, Jesus represents such value, such meaning, such genuine inspiration, that in her heart she is moved to do something special, something the likes of which she has probably never done before. At this moment she is so filled with admiration, so filled with amazement, so filled with joy that she is compelled to express her enthusiasm for Jesus in definitive terms. She's

not content to confess her admiration, that's not enough; she needs to show Jesus that what he has given her is a priceless treasure, and the best way for her to do that is by anointing Jesus with something of great value. This is an act of pure devotion, an act from the heart.

For the woman the cost of this act is not an issue. She knows that nothing in the world compares to the cost that Jesus will pay for her salvation. For this woman cost is not an issue because her life is different since she has come to know Jesus. For this woman cost is not an issue because she has been touched first-hand by this Jesus who others must only be content to hear about, and so in an act of genuine love and devotion she makes a sacrifice from the heart.

This ointment is said to have been the equivalent of a year's salary for a worker in that day and time, so we are talking big bucks here, a good deal of money. But while some see admiration and an act of the heart, others see waste. Many who claim to know Jesus—many who claim to know what his life is about, many who are closest to him—see this as a frivolous and wasteful act. Rather than understanding the value of the act, they focus on the worth of the object, and for them the woman's action is foolishness, a lavish waste of money.

Funny isn't it, that those who profess to know Jesus best, understand his worth and value the least, and so some indignantly ask, "Why was this ointment wasted like this, for it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." Those who questioned the woman's act of honor and respect couldn't see beyond the money. They focused so much on the cost that they couldn't see this phenomenal gift from God; they lost sight of the gift of Christ. But the woman had knowledge and vision that surpassed all the others. She understood this phenomenal gift from God.

God's gift of Jesus is the greatest gift humankind has ever known and it's the greatest gift humankind will ever know, but God continually blesses us with gifts, and it is a mistake to limit the value of these gifts by thinking of them purely in terms of costs. The woman demonstrates her understanding of the invaluable sacrifice Jesus is about to make by anointing him with costly ointment. It is an act of devotion, an act of the heart.

Acts of the heart are becoming rarer and rarer in our society because we put such an overwhelming emphasis on costs—on what it costs, on

how much it takes to get it, on what it takes to keep it—and as a result there is less and less room for acts of the heart. Acts of the heart come in grateful response to something we love. The woman responded out of her gratefulness to Jesus for his coming sacrifice. With our hearts we respond in gratefulness to God for the gift of Jesus and for what he has done for us.

Through the years the Presbyterian Church has been involved in ministries of the heart, and one of the most unique of these ministries is the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People. In many ways Self-Development was created as a response to society's increasing preoccupation with costs; it was created as a way for the church to act as much with its heart as with its pocketbook. With Self-Development the church affirms its faith in God by trusting in people's God-given potential. The church trusts in the God-given potential of people by standing as partners with them in their efforts to improve their lives—to increase self esteem, to move beyond poverty and oppression, to learn first-hand about the marvelous power of God's love. Self-Development helps the church respond with its heart as well as its pocketbook; it helps the church look beyond costs to the greater value of love.

Some of the disciples accuse the woman of wasting ointment that could have been sold for the benefit of the poor, and if you are thinking more in terms of facts and figures than from the heart, this is a reasonable argument. Indeed, we are constantly encouraged to be concerned about the poor, but at this moment, at this particular time in history, the woman's love for Jesus is greater than any other concern. She is acting from her heart, and her heart tells her that nothing is more important than showing her inestimable love for Jesus.

And Jesus is moved by the woman's graciousness. He says she has done a beautiful thing, and then he questions the disciples' sincerity and awareness. "You always have the poor with you, and you can show them kindness whenever you wish, but you will not always have me." Here the disciples are standing on the verge of the greatest event in history and they don't have a clue. The woman understands, and she pours out her heart for Jesus, but those closest to him just don't get it. At this particular moment their hearts are just not in it.

As people of faith our hearts have got to be in it. Many people are concerned about the conditions of the poor and suffering, but for some of

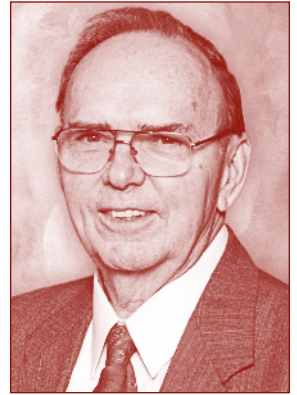
them it is not based on God's priceless gift of love. For them it has little to do with the heart. But for Christians, it's all about the heart. Jesus did something for us that touched our hearts. He laid down his life that we might have life and have it in abundance, and that's God's hope for all of us—that we would have life and have it in abundance—all of us. That's what mission is all about, helping to making God's abundance available to everyone; and that's why mission is an act of the heart. When we are involved in mission we are anointing the world with acts from the heart.

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God that Jesus has shown us God's inestimable love, and that God has given us hearts that respond in love.



# 4 Good News

► The Rev. Dale W. Robb



*The Rev. Dale Robb is a retired Presbyterian Pastor who served on the National Committee on the Self-Development of People from 1982 to 1987. He preached the sermon "Good News" interpreting SDOP in numerous pulpits in the United States and overseas. He and his wife, Arlene, live in Urbana, Illinois.*

**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 15:4-5: "...you shall have no poor among you... if only you obey the voice of the Lord your God."

Luke 4:18: "Jesus said, '...the Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...to set at liberty those who are oppressed...'"

**T**here is a story in Pakistan that an Islamic holy man became weary of awakening early to climb the minaret and call the faithful to prayer. He recorded his chant on a cassette so that he could awaken early, turn on the recorded chant and drift back to sleep.

The recording worked well until he had to leave town overnight and asked his wife to turn on the recording early the next morning. That afternoon his teenage son came hurriedly to borrow the tape machine to record some giddy jazz playing on his radio. In haste he turned on the recorder, taped the music and hurried away to meet his friends. He intended to change the tape upon return but completely forgot.

Imagine the consternation in the neighborhood the following morning when the dutiful wife turned on the player and the amplifiers in the minaret, instead of a somber chant, pounded out a teenager's noisy jazz.

We in the 21st-century family of Jesus Christ have a similar problem of communication. Jesus declared in Nazareth that he came to proclaim good news to the poor, but we have lost sight of his good news for the poor by misconstruing his words on another occasion. You may recall that he said, after a woman anointed him, "...you always have the poor...." (Mark 14: 3ff) Many people have taken his words to mean that poverty is an inevitable and incurable reality. This is a serious error in interpreting Jesus' words.

The Biblical base for good news to the poor is clear. We are the bearers of Jesus' good news for the poor, but few modern disciples have ever heard of God's promise, assurance that Jesus surely knew by reading the scroll of Deuteronomy: "There will be no one in need among you...if only you will obey the Lord your God..." (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)

God intends for the shackles of poverty to be broken and laid down the laws for that to happen. How was poverty to be eradicated? Two methods are set forth: One, every family was to give ten percent of its income to sustain the temple and to assist the poor. Two, unequal opportunity was to be corrected by special laws of ownership. Debts were to be forgiven every seventh year. Slaves were to be released in the same year, and, every 50th year, land was to be returned to the family that originally owned it.

In essence, God requires the nation to order its material affairs to assure the well-being of all. These laws display God's vision that earth is to be used for the benefit of all. For two centuries, the laws of the United States provided opportunities for poor and troubled people:

Low-priced land was available for anyone who would occupy it.

Tax-supported schools welcomed all children.

A graduated income tax and an inheritance tax enabled the Federal government to extend many benefits to all citizens.

Welfare and social security assistance were assured for poor, disabled and elderly people.

Throng of handicapped people received vocational rehabilitation.

Our nation paved the way among nations of earth for assuring opportunities, reducing poverty to ten percent of the population, a historic achievement.

But that achievement has come under danger. Poverty is increasing. 45 million citizens have no health insurance. For thirty years, amid decades of unprecedented prosperity, wages for low-income families have hardly kept pace with inflation. Millions work for less than a living wage and few benefits. The gap between rich and poor has greatly widened. Poverty is *bad news*. What has caused our nation to neglect the well-being of the weak and the poor? As Christian citizens we need to summon our society to consider the Biblical mandate to assure that there is no one in need among us.

The good news is that we Jesus people belong to churches that provide excellent leverage for breaking the yoke of poverty and injustice. In recent centuries, Presbyterians have been empowering the powerless on a global scale by establishing churches, schools, hospitals and settlement houses. In the developing world we sponsor 125 health centers and over 300 schools, colleges and universities.

Poverty relief is our Presbyterian watchword. In the past two decades, in the slums of Lahore, Pakistan, Dubuque Seminary-trained Rev. Samuel Jamal-ud-Din has used Presbyterian resources to establish Christian renewal centers. Listen to his own description of his work:

"I walk into one of these squalid settlements and begin talking with people. I ask them to tell me their needs. They name health care, a school, and brick houses instead of tents or shacks. I ask them what they can do and they offer to do the work. I suggest that they talk to their neighbors and meet me at a later date. Usually a large crowd gathers and we work out a plan:

They will find a building for classes and get children to enroll. They will assemble mothers and children for weekly visits of a mobile health team. I offer to provide teachers and a health team. When I see their progress and their happiness in bettering their lives, I rejoice that I have found the most exciting work in my career."

In recent decades we Presbyterians have greatly expanded our ability to empower poor people through Church World Service, the Hunger Program and the Self-Development of People Program. Much of the funding comes from the phenomenal response of Presbyterians nationwide to the One Great Hour of Sharing.

The Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People, launched in 1970, is an ingenious way to relieve poverty by forming partnerships between the prosperous and the poor. Since 1970 we have formed thousands of partnerships, investing millions of dollars in their self-help ventures in this country and around the globe.

For example, in 1975 the National Committee invested \$50,000 in a fishing cooperative in Baja Roco, Puerto Rico. This enabled them to buy a large fishing boat, a small building to freeze and store their catch and a pickup truck to haul their fish to a city market.

A decade later, a member of the National Committee visited the coop and helped carry large vats of choice fish from their boat to the storage

building. Would-be buyers crowded around waving 5-, 10- and 20-dollar bills as the fish were stowed in plastic sacks and weighed. One large, muscular fisherman said that twenty families earn a livelihood from the coop. He smiled as he added, "We are Catholic, but we thank God for the Presbyterians!"

Such stories of success in Presbyterian-supported Self-Development of People projects abound. We know that we can enable lowly people to arise and to stand on their own feet, strong and free. Consider our power:

We can help jobless people find work—yard work, housework or a job. A call to the personnel office of an employing company may offer you a thrilling surprise, and you may know the excitement of opening a door of opportunity for someone out of work.

We can study the experience of weak and troubled people and through the deacons or elders, foster new jobs or job training in our community. We can refer people in dire need to the National Office of Self-Development of People.

We can all give generously to the One Great Hour of Sharing. Last year, your congregation contributed \$\_\_\_\_\_ to that cause.

Remember, we are the Good News people. We serve a Master who said that he came to bring good news to the poor. We belong to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a national throng of Good News people. We know that when impoverished people hear the good news of Jesus Christ and discover who they are in God's sight, a new life begins. When prosperous folk form partnerships with communities of newly awakened poor people, miracles happen. You and I carry the light of life by which downtrodden people are set free.

Consider God's promise, "...there will be no poor among you...if only you obey the voice of the Lord your God..." Let us stand up as Good News people and use our love, our tithes and our efforts to break the yokes of poverty and let the oppressed go free.

Let us pray: Lord, we thank you for this bountiful earth. Empower us to use it lovingly and justly, that more and more of your people may enjoy peace and plenty. Through Jesus Christ, our Master and Redeemer. Amen.

# 5 Justice to the Nations

► The Rev. Dr. Fredric T. Walls



*The Rev. Dr. Fredric T. Walls, Honorably Retired, graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and Union Graduate School, served as the Director of the Self-Development of People (SDOP) from August 1980 until April 2002. Before coming to SDOP, he was in University Ministry, as the Houston Urban University Pastor and the Co-Pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas from 1968 to 1980.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:1-10a

## ISRAELITES

**T**he **Israelites** were in Babylonian captivity when they heard the astonishing message from the prophet Isaiah (*Isaiah 42: 1-10a*). Babylonians were the imperial superpower of the day. They exercised military and economic sway over the region. (Doesn't hearing that sort of make your mind think of modern-day national powers? But that's another story.) Many of the captive exiles had been political and religious leaders back in Jerusalem, but the nation had languished in Babylon for nearly 70 years, so they had made the best of it and carried on with their traditions. After so long, there was little hope of release.

During that era, the nations of the region believed that the power and might of a nation depended on the power and might of its gods. Marduk was Babylon's main god (chief god of the city of Babylon, the omniscient king of the pantheon, the creator of mankind, and the god of light and life). Since the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and had taken and held the Israelites for so many years, they believed Marduk to be superior and, at least in the eyes of the Babylonians, Yahweh was not very powerful, so that was the way they treated the Israelites and their God—as inferiors.

Psalms 137 was written during the Babylonian exile. It gives a hint of the state of mind of the captive Israelites, and the conditions under which they lived. (It also lets us know that the Babylonians loved to hear the Israelites sing.)

By the rivers of Babylon –  
 there we sat down and there we wept  
 when we remembered Zion.  
 On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
 For there our captors asked us for songs,  
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
 How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?  
 (*Psalm 137:1-4*)

Life was not easy! Life was not good! Life was downright deplorable!

In the passage of Scripture before the one we are considering, all had just heard the prophet of Yahweh condemn the idolatry and injustice of Babylon and the nations of the region. Now, at last, after all these years, Yahweh was going into action with a redeemer!

They heard Isaiah address them, proclaiming relief from the injustice:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
 I have put my spirit upon him;  
 He will bring forth justice to the nations . . .  
 He will faithfully bring forth justice.  
 He will not grow faint or be crushed  
 until he has established justice in the earth . . . .  
 (*Isaiah 42:1-4a*)

What joy there must have been! You can almost hear the Israelites saying, “After all these years, we had almost given up; but Yahweh is finally coming through! Yahweh is sending ‘the chosen one,’ God’s own servant to bring about justice for us!”

But the astonishing thing about the message from God is that they, the Israelites themselves, are “the chosen one” and that they will be “the one” to bring justice to the nations!

Listen:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

*(Isaiah 42:6-7)*

It appears that “to be chosen” means obligation and responsibility! This small chosen group is charged to stand against the idol gods, against the powers at hand, against the oppression, the captivity, the imprisonment, and to bring justice to the nations!

(When I was writing this, I wondered: “Are our modern political and religious leaders like the chosen Israelites or are they different, since they have been chosen ‘by the people?’ Does this biblical concept of ‘being chosen’ carry with it an obligation and a responsibility for justice in our time? Which of our modern political and religious leaders do you sense are working to bring justice to the nations?” You may want to consider those queries too.)

The small group of oppressed Israelite captives must have seen their new calling as an intimidating, daunting, overwhelming task! Not only did they have the Babylonians to confront, they would have to contend with the Assyrians, to the Northwest, where Syria is today (Asshur was their god and was regarded by the Assyrians as the great god, the king of all the gods.) and the Persians, to the East, in what is now Iran. (Their main gods were Ahura Mazda, for them, the ultimate god of absolute goodness, wisdom and knowledge, and Angra Mainyu, the evil spirit, who was constantly attempting to destroy the world of truth and to harm men and beasts.)

But the Scriptures tell us that the Israelites had the true God, not just one of the gods from the pantheon, but the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth, to help them in the face this of overwhelming task, which was theirs—the same God who had kept them and prepared them, all during their captivity!

Listen:

Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread forth the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those walk in it:  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you....  
*(Isaiah 42:5-6a)*

The task for the Israelites was enormous, but God was on the job! God was their help and their support. God is always on the job!

We could look at the history of the Israelites and see how well they did with their charge, the charge that God laid on them through Isaiah, which claimed them as “the chosen ones,” and the fulfillment of the obligation that comes with being chosen. But we won’t. We will let that be your homework. However, when we look closely at the declaration from Isaiah, we see that it really is not about the Israelites. It is about God—God’s love for the people created, about God’s activity, about God’s love for the nations and their justice—justice, which is liberation, and equity, and health, and clothing, and shelter, and quality of life, and the option to think and act for oneself, and the right to discover and become what God has intended! It is about God and bringing the nations back to the justice intended with creation!

## JESUS

If we look forward a few hundred years from the time Isaiah made the declaration for God, we find the words and the notion from our Scripture uttered again, this time, by the Gospel writers.

We usually think of Jesus when this Scripture is read—justifiably so, because God and the Gospel writers made Jesus “the spin” on this Old Testament declaration. For example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record a statement like this:

“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” *(Matthew 3:16-17)*

The Gospel of John says that John the Baptist gave testimony to this same event.

The Gospel writers describe Jesus as one who accepted his “chosen-ness” and his task, as he went about clarifying God’s intention for the nations, healing the sick and afflicted, feeding the hungry, and forgiving sins—even doing so on the Sabbath! Matthew points out that these acts of



Jesus were deliberate and meant to fulfill Isaiah's words to the Babylonian Captive Israelites, in Matthew's words:

Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,  
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my spirit upon him,  
And he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
...until he brings justice to victory.  
And in His name the Gentiles will hope.  
(*Matthew 12:18-21*)

Like the Israelites in Babylonian captivity, the task before Jesus was enormous. (As it is for you and me today, which I will address later.) He had to confront the idol gods. He had to stand against the imperial superpower of the day. He had to contend with the popular religious leaders, who knew they were always right. (Sound familiar?) He had to deal with sickness, and hunger, and oppression, and discrimination, and the conspiracy between the imperial powers and the popular religious leaders, who wanted to maintain the status quo. He had to bring justice to the nations!

Jesus knew that being "chosen" meant obligation and responsibility, and he accepted by using other similar words from Isaiah. You may recall that shortly after his baptism, he went to his hometown, and on the Sabbath day, he went to the synagogue and read from Isaiah:

"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*)

Then, he turned to all assembled and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!"

Jesus knew and accepted the enormity of his task; however, he was not shaken by it, because he knew the faithfulness of God, who created the heaven and the earth and all that lives on it—the God who had called him and sent him into the world, the God who would hold his hand and keep him! He knew God! He had been with God! He was God. He knew that God would not let him down, as he acted to bring justice to the nations.

With a close analysis of the activities of Jesus that are recorded in the Scriptures, and the declarations God made about him, we see that it is

really not about Jesus (the man), who walked the earth like you and me. It is about God! It is about God, who gave up his son, so that justice could prevail in the nations, so that women and men could find a way back to God's intended creation! It is about God!

## SELF-DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE, YOU, AND ME

Now, let's look forward several hundred more years. We can see, or imagine, or recall with a keen sense of surety, the words from our Scripture, which we heard and which were responded to by the Presbyterian Church in 1970. The Presbyterian Church responded to its "chosen-ness" with the obligation and the responsibility that go along with it and established the Self-Development of People, commonly known as SDOP: a response that demonstrated God's love for the people of the nations. A response designed to bring justice to the nations. It was (and is) a very special approach of the Gospel ministry, to help enable people to take the initiative in overcoming the things that hold them captive and limit their lives, and to do so in their own way! It was structured to help God's people gather the financial means to address their issues of liberation, and equity, and health, and shelter, and clothing, and quality of life, by having the means to think and act for themselves, and to exercise the right to discover and become what God had intended for them in their creation. It was designed to help bring justice to the nations.

Just like it was with the Israelites and Jesus, the SDOP task was (and is) daunting and enormous, but since 1970, Presbyterians and like-minded partners from other churches that joined them, have labored to fulfill the obligation and responsibility: people like all those first National Committee members and staff, who were saints and who gave the ministry its form and structure; or like the Youngstown, Ohio pastor, who served SDOP with distinction during the reunion of the Presbyterian Church and whose self-development fervor maintained the ministry's integrity in the process and kept it securely locked in the reunited structure; or the community activist, a strong saintly woman, who always was concerned to give God the praise and credit for her work with SDOP (Her home in Biloxi, Mississippi was damaged by hurricane Katrina, and several months before that she lost her husband, who served the General Assembly Council and was a strong supporter of SDOP.); or like the pastor/intellectual, who served SDOP and the General Assembly Council, and was always prepared and ready to stand up for SDOP against any foe; or like the AT&T executive, who

helped SDOP with its organizational integrity and went on to become the Church's National Ministries Director; or like the ecumenical church officer, who served on the first Synod of the Sun's SDOP Committee (He and I served on that Committee together back in the early seventies.) and as we all know, he has become our honorable Stated Clerk; or like the down-to-earth domestic missionary, who passed away a few months ago from cancer, whose heart was sweet and larger than the cancer that claimed her, who labored endlessly in the trenches with the people whom SDOP serves; or like the incredible present members of the National Committee and staff!

There have been so many people involved from all walks of life, in a kaleidoscope of colors, a literal United Nations of nationalities, a cross-section of economic backgrounds, a full spectrum of political views, young people and old people, able people and those not so able, but all of them in the spirit of "chosen-ness." They have labored tirelessly in the effort to bring justice to the nations. They have worked to establish meaningful partnerships with large and small groups across the world, who have decided to take control of their own lives and struggle toward a better quality of life and the justice that God intended in their creation: like the now-famous Inuit People's group that organized to prevent their exploitation on the North Slope of Alaska when oil was discovered there, and as a result gained control of their land, and with their success they even became a large financial contributor to SDOP; or like the small group of wheel-chaired people, who struggled with the City of Denver, Colorado to have the city's buses made accessible, and won, and went on to be instrumental in the structure and passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act; or like the group of farmers in Ghana West Africa, who organized to work together, rather than individually, which resulted in a new economy in their region and a new and better quality of life for themselves and their families.

Today, with shrinking resources, the task is as daunting and as enormous as ever! The "chosen ones" are surrounded by idolatry of greed, massive poverty worldwide (with more than 37 million people living in poverty here in the United States alone), thousands of people are being murdered in the Darfur region of Sudan, thousands more are starving in Niger, hundreds are killed and thousands are made homeless in Iraq, thousands are exiled in their own land by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and our government probably will try to make massive cuts that will likely further hurt the more

than 37 million poor people living in this country. One can see intolerance, racism, ageism, sexism, classism, genocide, and incompetence in national leadership, not only in the United States, but in nations around the world: in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Niger, Palestine, Kenya, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Nepal, Peru, Brazil, Germany, France, Bosnia, Uzbekistan, Russia, China, and on and on and on and on...!

How can we sing the Lord's song by the floodwaters of Katrina or Rita? How can we establish justice for the nations? It may be our mournful cry, but deep in our hearts we know, as did the Israelites and Jesus, that we have the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth to help us face and struggle with these overwhelming conditions. With God holding our hands and keeping us, no captivity, no tsunami, no hurricane Katrina or Rita, no Darfur genocide, no horrible war in Iraq, no incompetent leaders, no "powers that be," have the ability to stand in the way of God's love for Her creation or Her will to hold us by the hand, as we act to bring justice to the nations, because in the final analysis, it really was not about us! It is about God; Her activity, Her love and Her concern for Her people. So it was with the captive Israelites, so it is with Jesus, and so it has been with the Church and the Self-Development of People!

We know where the Israelites, Jesus, and the Church were when they heard this astonishing message of God from Isaiah. Where were you when you heard it for the first time? Do you hear it now?

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations,  
 to open the eyes that are blind,  
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
*(Isaiah 42:6-7)*

Is it claiming you to bring justice to the nations? "Sing a new song, praise God to the end of the earth!"

# Meditations

## 1 BLESSED ARE...

► **Elder William Reyes, former SDOP member**



*Elder William Reyes was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico, and came to New York in 1964. He graduated from the Institute for the preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2001. He is presently an active member of the Session at Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana Hispana Principe de Paz (Prince of Peace First Hispanic Presbyterian Church) in Asbury Park, NJ. He serves on the Board of Trustees of the Presbytery of Monmouth and the Council Committee On Grants Social Witness Task Force of the Synod of the Northeast. He is serving a second term as the moderator of the Hispanic/Latin American Caucus of the Synod of the Northeast and is the delegate from the Northeast Hispanic Caucus to the National Hispanic Presbyterian Caucus Council.*

**Scripture:** Luke 6:20-21

**In Luke 6:20 –21**, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

A great need makes its presence known before great opportunity. In the midst of suffering, there is the hope of happiness. This passage from Luke reveals hope in the midst of uncertainty and faith in the face of desperation.

Poverty, cloaked in hunger, desperately dreams of a new garment. Through partnerships between Self-Development of People and those who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged, great need and great opportunity meet and offer the possibility of hope, faith and liberation, through God’s gift of our offerings for Self-Development of People.

Reaching out in partnership to communities in need is the mission of SDOP. The Presbyterian Committee on The Self-Development of People is one of the most powerful ministries that God uses to tell us: “Blessed are

you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

Because God is merciful and full of grace, God’s kingdom on earth is inclusive of all who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged and who seek to enter into partnership with SDOP. When their needs are great, God’s servants on the SDOP Committee remain faithful, working together with them to meet their needs in a spirit of equality and empowerment, through the gifts of our offerings to SDOP.

*Almighty God, we humbly come to you in thanksgiving for the gifts of talents, cultural diversity and tireless work offered readily and willingly by the SDOP Committee members; thanks for that beautiful mosaic represented by their service. Merciful God, in your love, your grace embraces those who are poor, oppressed and disadvantaged. Blessed are those who hunger now, for they shall be satisfied and blessed are those who weep now for they shall laugh—in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.*

## 2 WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF US?

► **The Rev. Dr. Carlton Wu**



*The Rev. Dr. Carlton Wu was born in Honen, China. He came to the United States in 1952. He received the Th. B. from Boston University, Th. M. from Princeton Seminary and D. Min. from Drew University. He was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Champlain and Rouses Point, New York from 1958-1995 and a member of the SDOP*

*National Committee from 1997-2004. His new book, “From Yellow River to Lake Champlain,” will soon be published by Dorrance Publishing Co.*

**Scripture:** Micah 6:6-8

**T**here are many Scriptures in the Bible that support the SDOP ministry. This morning, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the SDOP theological basis from the Old Testament. My favorite Scripture from the Old Testament is in the book of Micah, chapter 6, verses 6-8. Micah lived around 700 B.C. At that time, when people came to worship God, they brought animals such as calves or sheep to be sacrificed as offerings

to God. Some even offered their first-born child as a sacrificial offering, so that God would bless them and show favor on them. But the prophet Micah told them, this is not God's requirement. God's requirement is: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

So, this morning, I try to show how God's requirements relate to the SDOP ministry. The first requirement from God, according to Micah, is to do justice. What does it mean to do justice? To do justice means to treat all people the same. To do justice means to stop taking advantage of other people. It was hard to find justice at the time of Micah. It is also hard to find justice in our time.

I am glad to say that the SDOP ministry is a ministry of helping people struggle for justice. For instance, at a restaurant in California, the owner was taking advantage of the newly arrived immigrants. These workers classified as exempt, so the owner paid them a monthly salary of only \$600.00. The workers had to work ten to twelve hours a day and often seven days a week. SDOP provided funds for educating these immigrants about their rights and labor laws. In a certain sense, the SDOP ministry is a ministry of doing justice. Let us have the courage to fight for justice through our SDOP ministry, so that one day we can say with the words of Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

Secondly, God requires us to love kindness. What does it mean to love kindness? To love kindness means to help people, to love people. It means to share our knowledge and resources with others. To love kindness means to treat people as ends, not means. The SDOP ministry is a ministry of kindness. Through SDOP, we have helped people to dig wells for water and start their own clinics. We have helped prisoners to learn new skills. All these are actions of love and kindness.

Not long ago, the National SDOP Committee met in Newark, New Jersey. Members were asked to bring clothing and food for that meeting. They did distribute clothing and food to the homeless in New York City from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.. Why did they do that? They did it to obey God's requirement to love kindness. Mother Teresa said in her book, entitled *Words to Love By*, "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many good things we have done; we will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.'"

Finally, according to Micah, God requires us to walk humbly with our God. What does it mean to walk humbly with God? To walk humbly with God means to put God first and person second. To walk humbly with God means to respect every person, because every person is God's child. Jesus was a humble man, willing to wash his disciples' feet.

I have to say that the SDOP ministry is also a ministry of humility. When people ask for help, SDOP does not tell them what project they have to have. They must decide by themselves. We do not control the project; they control the project. The project must belong to them, not to SDOP.

When people apply for SDOP funds, they are considered partners. To be a partner means to stand on the same level. We are not their masters. So the ministry of SDOP is also a ministry of humility.





# Charge

1

As you go out into the world,  
 Strive for justice,  
 Pray for peace,  
 Work for the empowerment of those who are oppressed,  
 And serve God in all that you do.

2

Go forth in peace.  
 Live each day in service.  
 Grow each day in love.  
 Greet each day with hope.  
 Rejoice each day in God's grace.

3

*Micah 6:8*

God has shown you what is good.  
 What does the Lord require of you  
 But to do justice,  
 And to love kindness,  
 And to walk humbly with your God?

4

Go now in peace.  
 Be a servant to those you know and love, and to those who are strangers.  
 Be a witness to God's compassion for all people.  
 Be a worker for God's justice, and a partner in the self-development of all people. Amen.

# Benediction

1

As you leave this place, may God's grace be with you, calling you to care for those who suffer;

May the presence of the risen Christ fill you with compassion for those in need;

May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit empower you and all people to do God's work in the world. Amen.

2

Go now in the name of God, in whose image we are all made;

In the name of Jesus Christ, who knew everyone as a neighbor;

And in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who gives equal comfort to those who have all that they need and to those who need much. Amen.





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