

CRIBBS NOTES – September 30, 2007

Do we really know and appreciate how rich we are? No matter what our income is, we are among the rare, low percentage of wealthy people living in the world. We have money, property, privilege, mobility, and influence that many others never imagined for themselves. After visiting another country, sometimes Americans return to the United States with a pronounced sense of gratitude. “I’m glad to be home,” some may say. “I have never seen such poverty as I witnessed in....”

It is easy to make comparisons between living conditions in the affluent environs of this nation and the meager material accumulation in so many places around the globe. Our trash is a treasure trove for persons desperately eking out a living.

People are hungry and dying for food. An estimated 40-thousand people will die today from malnutrition and starvation. That is 14.6 million people a year. When it comes to the lack of clean, safe water, the statistics are more staggering.

Consider these facts from the World Health Organization (WHO):

About 2.6 billion people – half the developing world – lack even a simple ‘improved’ latrine and 1.1 billion people have no access to any type of improved drinking source of water. As a direct consequence:

- 1.6 million people die every year from diarrhoeal diseases (including cholera) attributable to lack of access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation and 90% of these are children under 5, mostly in developing countries;
- 160 million people are infected with schistosomiasis causing tens of thousands of deaths yearly; 500 million people are at risk of trachoma from which 146 million are threatened by blindness and 6 million are visually impaired;
- intestinal helminths (ascariasis, trichuriasis and hookworm infection) are plaguing the developing world due to inadequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene with 133 million suffering from high intensity intestinal helminths infections; there are around 1.5 million cases of clinical hepatitis A every year.

We cannot escape such facts. Even here in America, people are neglected and unable to provide the essentials for themselves. The most recent and blatant reminder came in the aftermath of Katrina two years ago. Wealth and poverty exist in close proximity, yet, too often, we who are able to do something to meet the needs of the most vulnerable do little or nothing to remedy and relieve preventable crises.

It is not a matter of meting guilt onto the rich and wealthy. Rather, it is to raise the question, “What are we doing with our riches?” Do we even care about the plight of our sisters and brothers trapped in the mire of poverty? Do we blame the poor for being poor and never share our resources? Or, are we using our gifts of treasure and talent to come to the aid of those crying out for help?

This week the president of the United States addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations. He outlined the tenets of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted by the United Nations 62 years ago. Throughout his speech, the president urged the UN to take aggressive steps toward fulfilling the Declaration and creating international conditions for human rights to flourish. A vision for a world free of disease, poverty, and suffering was rhetorically projected.

What is required is more than mere words. We must embody generosity and goodness. It is the work we do and the deeds we perform that ultimately manifest our commitment to the alleviation of global deterioration and the madness of violence. We have the technology, science, and ability to end poverty. So far, we have lacked the will to make our resources available at a meaningful level to change the quality of life experienced by people domestically and internationally. Despite our touting of programs and dollars sponsored by the United States, compared to our expenditures on military personnel and weaponry, we fall far short of what is needed and can be done.

This is the challenge that confronts our society. We are rich and too often selfish. We place a high priority on private property and personal self-interests at the expense of those whose lives are adversely affected by our practices and life-styles. For there to be a positive change, we must confess our sins of gross materialism, militarism, and inhumane conduct. Our failure to do so will result in the world hearing our words for what they are worth. Vacant, empty platitudes uttered with arrogance. What would God say about that?