

**Making a World of Difference**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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**Text: Isaiah 65:17-25**

What a momentous, life-changing week it was!

Yes, one church member underwent major surgery and faces a long, painful recovery. Another had a promising job interview. One family planned the memorial service for their beloved patriarch. One couple held their new grandson for the first time. A member is reeling from news of deeper-than-expected job cuts in his company. Some families wrote college tuition checks. One member celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Another elderly member made the decision to cease therapeutic treatment and enter hospice care. What a momentous, life-changing week it was for each of these individuals and families. . .

. . . .against a backdrop of historic, life-changing events for our nation. The inauguration of Barack Obama as America's first African-American president has generated an outpouring of hope and energy not seen in a very long while. Always, our personal stories—their tragedies and triumphs, beginnings and endings—are lived in a broader context. Though the immediacy of our particular lives frequently demands our primary attention, we do not live in a vacuum. Our personal stories are shaped significantly by the social, cultural, and historical realities of our time and place. And our lives are inextricably connected to the lives of everyone else who inhabits this planet by virtue of our common Parentage. Children of God, one and all, and therefore our brothers and sisters. To ignore them and focus exclusively on our individual realities is to settle for a narrow vision, limited in creative possibility and Divine purpose. In clear recognition of this theological affirmation, Fairmount's Outreach Ministry Council has asked us to consider our response to the challenge of global poverty—the

plight of the desperately poor who live on less than one dollar a day. The Outreach Ministry Council asked me to preach about this challenge as a way of initiating a congregational conversation which will continue at Friday's dinner presentation and then on subsequent Wednesday evenings. As we do so, I hope we will keep foremost in our minds the personal dimension of these grim realities. Behind the statistics, maps, and bar graphs are persons, human beings who bleed and cry and love and dream just as we do. Concern for these, our brothers and sisters around the world, does not diminish care for those in our own homes and city. I hope instead we will understand our calling as part of a whole cloth, and explore ways to alleviate people's suffering wherever it occurs.

We have a precedent for such a global vision. In today's Scripture text, the prophet proclaims that God is about to create new heavens and a new earth, a complete make-over from current reality. Described here is a realm of justice and peace on earth, woven by God from the tangled skeins of human history. Isaiah's hope-filled vision emerged at perhaps the lowest point in Israel's history, following defeat at the hands of their enemy Babylon. The nation lay in ruins, the Temple was destroyed, many of the citizens were killed or forcibly exiled. Amid all that heartbreak, fear and uncertainty, the prophet offers a window on a future of abundance, longevity, and peace. As we read it, notice how the scope of blessing is both wide and intensely personal. Listen for God's Word to the inheritors of these promises, in the reading from Hebrew Scripture, the book of the prophet Isaiah, in the 65<sup>th</sup> chapter at the 17<sup>th</sup> verse.

[ISAIAH 65:17-25]

Peter: It's a beautiful and compelling vision, but how realistic is it? Sustainable food production? Reduced infant mortality? An end to violence and civil strife? These are dreams that seem unattainable. The global reality is devastating....and discouraging: one hundred fifty million underweight children, making them vulnerable to preventable diseases; 30,000

deaths of children under the age of five *every day*; nine-hundred-twenty-four *million* slum dwellers; international debt servicing that severely reduces poor countries' resources for health care and education. How can we defeat these scourges?

Louise: The problems are enormous. But the call to care for the poor is as old as our Judeo-Christian faith. The people of Israel were commanded to give special care to widows, orphans, and refugees---people in need. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus broadened the definition of "neighbor" to include even strangers in trouble. Time and again, he demonstrated compassion to those who hungered for both bread and meaning and commanded his followers to do the same. On the basis of our faith, how can we *not* address these issues?

Peter: Of course we must. But how? I am by no means an expert in global poverty, but I have read widely in the literature of development economics. The one thing that I have come away with is an appreciation for the fact that few economists agree on what is needed to reduce global poverty. For some economists, the answer lies in microfinance—small loans to local entrepreneurs. For others, what is needed is the end to government corruption. Still other economists prescribe huge infrastructure projects, while another group wants countries to open up to more foreign investment. The World Bank and a number of United Nations programs have been working on various proposals for over five decades—and despite some obvious success stories, the problems in some parts of the world seem to be intractable. If the experts cannot agree, how is Fairmount supposed to know what its role ought to be?

Louise: In 2000, the nations of the world including the United States, agreed to an action plan, a kind of roadmap by which to address the particular issues of extreme poverty. These are known as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and include targets for education, health care, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and financial development. Collectively they are designed to cut extreme poverty in half by

2015—and there is evidence that these actions can be effective to that end. Economist Jeffrey Sachs has made extreme poverty his focus for over 20 years, and has come to believe that "Ours is the first generation in the history of the world with the ability to eradicate extreme poverty. We have the means, the resources, and the know-how," he says. "All we lack is the will."

Peter: Is it lack of will? Or is it a matter of priority? We are deeply concerned for the poverty in our back yard, in our city that ranks among the poorest in the nation. We've already shown that we can make a positive difference in Cleveland by constructing homes through Habitat for Humanity, by building the capacity of our young people to lead lives of accomplishment through the programs of the Heights Youth Club and E-Prep School, and in countless other ways. Doesn't that mean our efforts should be directed here first of all??!

Louise: It is absolutely crucial to respond to concerns in our community. But widening our view does not need to crowd out these concerns. The faces of the poor we encounter in Cleveland can help us see the human face of poverty everywhere. Some members of our congregation are already connected to ministries and mission personnel in other countries and find spiritual nurture through those relationships and connections. We certainly will have to make decisions about prioritizing the use of our resources, and it makes sense that the larger part of those resources would be invested in our region. Still, God has blessed us abundantly, and we have the ability to reach further and wider to share our gifts. The Outreach Ministry Council's study sessions provide opportunity to learn more about both the problems and the promising solutions being advanced. God will lead us to choose and prioritize actions that are faithful and just.

Peter: But choosing the right responses and priorities will be challenging! Historical evidence suggests that the quickest and most sustainable path out of poverty and degradation is a good job. We know that per capita income in China and East

Asia has more than tripled in 2 decades. The proportion of people in that region experiencing extreme poverty has been reduced from an eye-popping 56% to a more manageable 17%. World history has never seen such a dramatic decrease in the numbers of impoverished people. This occurred primarily through job creation and increased participation in the global economy. But Fairmount does not create jobs, nor do we have control over governments of local economies that have the power to make markets work better. How do we find our place at the table?

Louise: We can become better informed about creative partnerships with private corporations and financial institutions, faith-based organizations and philanthropic foundations, and the world-wide call for debt relief that are able to influence job creation and trade growth. We can support trade agreements and multilateral policies that increase small-farm production. Take the example of fairly-traded products. When we buy them, we consumers know that most of the cost we pay directly benefits the otherwise impoverished producer, instead of those profits evaporating in payments for packaging, marketing, and distributing. These fairly-traded products are claiming increasingly larger percentages of market share, lifting whole villages out of poverty. The Presbyterian Church works in partnership with Christian and interfaith organizations in over sixty countries offering secondary and higher education opportunities, job training, microfinance, and community organizing, all of which help the market system work better for people.

Peter: And we can learn more about national and international policies affecting poverty, and advocate for ones which promote social cohesion and justice. Addressing global poverty is a bi-partisan undertaking. President Bush endorsed the Millennium Development goals and took aggressive action to fund important initiatives. Then, in his inaugural address, President Obama called for Americans to work together to rebuild the faltering economy and to tend to problems here at home. But he also carved out a wider agenda,

accepting the mantle of leadership in the global arena, saying, To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow, to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect.

Louise: I hear that as a strong reminder of the interdependence of the world today. We will not work alone. Our efforts will be more effective because they are multiplied by others: from our neighbors next door at St. Paul's and the Cleveland Interfaith community to governmental and non-governmental agencies committed to a vision of a more just and peaceful world.

Peter: But I'm still struggling. When I volunteer to work at the manse with the temporarily homeless through the Interfaith Hospitality Network I get to see the people who need my help—I can see their wonderful humanity, their potential, and that I make a difference in their lives. And when John Zitzner gives me a personal tour of E-Prep School I can see the kids straining to learn and thirsty for success, and I can see how Fairmount and Fairmounters make a difference. I am sure that the Fairmounters who work in countless other ways – those who build houses, who tutor, and who help our community build its capacity for success – are nourished by the tangible evidence that they are making a difference. Despite the horrific pictures of poverty and destitution around the world, it is understandable that we might have trouble getting motivated to fight global poverty because Fairmount's role in the global arena is somehow not tangible or "real."

Louise: Thanks for naming what is probably true for most of us. Look, we all want our volunteer time, energy, and resources to make a difference. It's more fulfilling when there's a pay-off, when the results are tangible. Yet some of the tasks to which God calls us are simply larger than what can

be captured in a photograph or quantified by numbers or presented for inspection. For those ministries we have to have to practice the kind of faith the Bible says is the assurance of things not seen. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman calls it “empathic imagination--”a kind of seeing with the heart. We can use it to “envision” what is not yet there, but which God has promised. With that vision in mind, we can tackle what often seems an impossible mission, trusting God’s faithfulness to bring it to completion. And we may be surprised by some revelations of the deep interconnection we share with all humanity. One startling example was reported recently in *The Oprah Magazine*. A fifteen-year-old girl from Alexandria, Virginia donated a favorite but outgrown blue wool sweater to an international charity. They sent it to Kenya where it was added to a mountain of donated clothing and was sold to a secondhand clothing organization for distribution throughout Africa. The girl eventually graduated from college and landed a job with Chase Manhattan Bank, reviewing loans at banks in troubled economies. Her experience there lead her to join a nonprofit in Africa that finances small businesses. While in Kigali, Rwanda on a project, she spotted a young boy wearing a familiar-looking sweater--- the same blue sweater she had donated eleven years earlier. This amazing coincidence jolted her with the awareness of how even the smallest actions can touch people, people we may never know and never meet. Writing of the experience, she concluded, “we all play a role in the change we need to create.” [as reported in *The Oprah Magazine*, February 2009, p. 165]

Friends, can we look at the hungry, hurting world and see one child in a bright blue sweater: healthy, thriving, educated, with a real chance of having a life? We can make a world of difference to that child, and others. With faith and hope, let us imagine together the new earth God is even now creating, and find our purpose in it. Amen.

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