

The Growing Gap Between Rich and Poor

by
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In this political season it has been mentioned that the gap between rich and poor has grown wider. Two pillars of capitalism, free trade and the corporate structure have come under attack for the exploitation of low-wage, third world labor and huge indiscriminate layoffs respectively. Both may be playing a role in this rift.

My belief is that rather than an economic gap between rich and poor, the question is one of propinquity. We fear what we do not know. We do not know because we do not see. We do not see because too often we are not there.

It has come in vogue today to proclaim values, virtue and justice as the remedy for the nation's multitude of social problems. However, there is a missing ingredient. That ingredient is putting the words into action by example. Too many want to talk the talk without walking the walk. Some have used this talk to declare open season on the poor stoking a hatred that alienates and expands the gap further.

Through the years, I believe that government has slowly assumed a large part of one of our churches' most fundamental tenets - that of helping the less fortunate. By allowing government to usurp this role, one of the most diabolical forms of evil has infiltrated our society. As example, human dignity has been stripped through the welfare system and a perverse dependence has been created that is difficult to break. Although government has a role, it cannot address the human spirit. Those of us in churches can and should bridge the gap.

One of my most vivid memories is of a church located in a middle class neighborhood within a mid-size town. The year was 1984 and an influx of homeless people began trickling onto the streets because of governmental funding cuts. The church members at first seemed largely indignant that our government was throwing people out onto the streets particularly since some began sleeping within close proximity of the church. But soon some church leaders stepped up and proclaimed that it was their job, their calling to help those people.

A homeless shelter was formed by several churches in the area. My church began to ask the congregation for volunteers to feed and then sleep with the homeless. I reluctantly volunteered. I was not trying to be a hero. But it occurred to me that this was the business of my church and not my government. And if I did not help then I was nothing more than words.

When I took my first shift in the shelter I quickly became indoctrinated with the harsh realities of homelessness. I did not realize how many homeless were schizophrenic and in need of real help. I did not realize that some had kids. I did not realize that some were

teenagers. I did not realize that some were once successful people. I did not realize that some genuinely wanted to work and despised the humiliating experience of sleeping in a shelter.

After my second shift I inadvertently found myself staring into the eyes of someone sitting across from me. I found myself looking beyond the grime, the dirt and the smell. I found myself gazing beyond the child abuse that had been inflicted, beyond the years of drug addiction and beyond the desperate, self-deprecating measures taken simply to survive on the streets. And then I found myself realizing that the person I was looking at could have been me. It was a defining moment in my life. I prided myself on my self-reliance, determination and skill. But all that crashed down on me that day. Suddenly God's grace loomed large.

Sound bites do not get it done. Faith in action is a gem. Former President Jimmy Carter is quietly doing far more good to bridge the gap between rich and poor through his example with habitat for humanity than all the vitriolic rhetoric being bantered about on the air waves combined. My fear is that the distant "haves" are beginning to despise the "have-nots" because they are unaware that they are us and we are them.



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