

Sunday, March 22, 2026

The Fifth Sunday In Lent (Passiontide Begins)

Solemn Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom

on

Isaiah 1:1-19; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

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Service to the Poor: Caring for our Neighbor

Part of our 2026 Lenten Sermon Series on The Five Habits of Christian Life.

I come to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We continue this evening our sermon series for Lent on the Christian habits or

Christian practices. And the goal of the Christian practices are to dwell with God.

That's it. To dwell with God. And God has given us many ways to do this.

Some of them may be intuitive to you. We've talked already about prayer, about confession, and spiritual direction. We've talked about Holy Communion. Next week, we'll talk about reading Scripture. But this week, tonight, we're hearing about the spiritual practice of caring for the poor. And this may not initially make sense to you. It may not exactly fit in that list of so-called spiritual or Christian practices. But it is a primary way in which we dwell with God, caring for the poor.

And so who are the poor? This may seem obvious to you, who is included in the poor, I'm not sure. But it's not all that obvious, actually. There are many people who pretend to be poor and are not. If you don't believe me, just look out. Tax season is coming up, and many will be doing something like this. But also, many are poor and don't know it. Maybe they hide it or cover it up, or they just never thought of it in that sense.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are three categories of these folks that we call poor, and they're consistently linked together. It is the orphan, the widow, the immigrant. Those three, always linked together, almost always. And sometimes there's just a shorthand for it, and it just says "the poor." Care for the poor.

The poor can be financially poor. This should be assumed. But it's not always. It is not always limited to just poverty of money. We can be more descript than that. The poor *is the vulnerable, the exposed, those who are unprotected*. They find themselves vulnerable to all sorts of abuses of power. They're those on the brink of *social, psychological, physical, spiritual turmoil*.

That's the poor. And anyone can be a part of this, actually. In fact, all of us are poor in some ways and not in others.

But there is a distinction. There's a distinction between the poor and the not poor that does exist. Maybe we can think of it as like if society was a hospital, the poor are those who show up to the ER in need of critical care. That's the poor.

I think there may be many misconceptions that are already coming to your mind about how caring for the poor is a Christian practice as a way to dwell with God. There's plenty of ways we can get tripped up in this, but I'm going to name just two.

And one is that we may think that it is *good, but it is optional*.

We just look at the most public portrayals of Christianity, at least in our land, and you would think that the poor have no claim on us whatsoever. Maybe you want to volunteer or do charity. Those are words we use to connote this sort of voluntary care, but that's how we think of it. It's a good thing, but it's optional, this caring for the poor. But this is not reflected in the Bible. No, there's many laws given, very particular ones about how the people of God are to reflect the glory of God to the world, about how they are to care for the poor. And not everyone has to do everything in the same way, but there's some particulars there.

So, if you have land, there's a portion that you have to leave, at least 10% to the poor, and they take that 10% as they please. If you work in the government every three years, there's this massive redistribution of means to the poor. If you're in banking, there is no usury. You don't lend at interest, which is unfathomable, I know, and not all of these are one-to-one to modern life. But this was true then, that if you were poor, you would not go into further debt by borrowing from your neighbor. Not every person has to do the same things, but caring for the poor is commanded.

We heard read in our Old Testament, reading the prophet Isaiah, saying that caring for the poor is so necessary that when people do not, *God halts the worship service*.

The sacrifices stop. God says, stop sacrificing to me. "Stop sending me your money. Stop the whole thing. The poor are dying in your cities. Their blood is on your hands and you have not cared for them. You're trampling the poor, so keep my name out of your mouth. Go and do justice to them, then come back and worship. I'll welcome you then."

In the Old Testament, especially, care for the poor is not optional. It is not charity. It is *justice*. It is what they deserve. It is required. They're entitled to these protections and rights. And every person has to abide, not just the rich. Every person, even if you are poor. And this is not just another yoke to carry. No, this is, I think, the poor being dignified too by God, that they are invited into the work of caring for the poor, even when you are poor.

The second misconception, I think, is not just that caring for the poor is optional in the Christian life. but that it relies on you, that it relies on you.

And I don't think anyone would consciously say this out loud, right? This is much more internal, but that it relies on you. We know that it is commanded. So that means it must depend on me.

I must be the one to do it. You can already hear the anxiety. If care for the poor is just mandatory, if it just relies on you, you will be ashamed when you don't do enough or when you don't do as much as you think that you should. It's a really good way to feel bad and actually not be very successful at caring for the poor, this anxiety-producing, I have to do it.

I walked by a sign the other day that said, "what are you doing to change the world?" I thought, "Nothing." I'm doing, I think, good things, I hope. I'm not changing the world. This kind of anxiety, it's up to me. I must redeem the poor by myself.

If I'm only commanded to start to care for the poor, because it's up to me, even if I am successful, I'll just be self-righteous. I'll turn to the people who don't with scorn and hate. And I have used the poor for my own ego.

But, a central claim of the Bible is not just that we are commanded to care for the poor, but that it is God who first cares for the poor, that *God is the liberator of the poor*.

We do not save them, God does. Abraham's descendants get enslaved by Egypt, and God rescues them from slavery because he hears the cries of the poor. They're rescued from Assyria and Babylon and Persia, and God is the one who rescues the poor. This does not mean that we do nothing, that we pray and sit. In Christ, the poor, who are oppressed by financial and social and educational and carceral systems, these things stalk their lives and strangle their freedoms. They're offered and released to abundant life and God, and then they're brought into the family of God. where it's supposed to be a counter-cultural expression of love that is against all oppression.

We participate in God's liberative work, not as the cause, but as the participants.

So, we see caring for the poor as a Christian practice because it is commanded by God and it is carried out by God, but we're also invited into it. It's not just something we do. It's a place where we meet God. And this, I think, is the most vital point if you go home with nothing else.

I hope that it is this, in fact, that the main reason we care for the poor is not just because God commanded it or because God liberates the poor, but because *God is poor*.

As our Old Testament reading shares, "though God is rich, for our sakes became poor." Became poor. Of course, in his incarnation, I think those of us who are familiar with Christianity know this, that Jesus becomes an immigrant running from evil oppressors. He's born with no place, homeless. His parents, not married. He is vulnerable.

But it's not just the incarnation, though. See, the central revelation of God in Christianity, it's

Not Creation, It's not giving of the law or teaching. It's not even freeing from Egypt or the incarnation.

It is the Cross.

The Cross is the central revelation of God. It is the place reserved for the poor, for the destitute, for the forgotten. And in Christ, at the Cross, God reveals who he is.

We have these ways of dwelling with God, these spiritual practices. And in the church, you may have heard this word. I don't know how familiar you are with the church.

They're called sacraments. And sacraments are things God has commanded for all Christians to do. In the Episcopal Church, there are two, Holy Communion and Baptism. And five Sacramental Rites, but the two are commanded by God for all Christians to do them. And he's also promised to meet us there. So, they are something God has commanded and a place where Jesus has promised to meet us. And if that is true, then caring for the poor is not just a Christian practice. It is a sacrament. It is a dwelling with God because God is poor.

So why does this matter? You may already have many reasons that I haven't even thought of. But if we don't see it this way, that caring for the poor is dwelling with God, I think we're going to go off the rails in at least a few ways. One is that we won't do it at all. We'll think that it's optional. We will ignore it or reserve it for some special class of person.

If it's only mandatory, then you'll get burnt out. You will. I know it because you tell me. It's hard. If it's only moral, then you will judge others as soon as you do what you think you should do.

But if it is about dwelling with God, then caring for the poor becomes a joy, a true joy. So the question is not, am I doing enough? The question is, where might God be inviting me to meet with him? Where is this meeting place? Where do I dwell with God? And God has given very specific places where God can be found. Christian practices like prayer and reading scripture and one of those places is among the poor. And in caring for them, we do not just help them as if they are them. We meet him.

There's, in closing, It's an old story about a pastor who was, he thought, on his deathbed and he was there for a few weeks and the nurses started to really like this pastor. And so they started asking questions about what it was like to be a pastor. And they said, do you have any regrets over the years? Like, is there anything that you want to confess to us?

And he said, yeah, I have lots of regrets. many regrets, but there's something that happened 35 years ago and I just can't get it off my mind. And I kind of would like to share it with you, to confess it with you in case this is my last.

He said, 35 years ago, I walked into a coffee shop and I had ordered my coffee and a man walked in and he was caked with dirt and he wasn't being disruptive, but I could tell he was not having a very good day. And as soon as he walked in, the coffee shop owner kicked him out. And I didn't say anything.

And the nurse looked at him and said, this is the thing that you regret most. In 35 years, this is the thing that clings to you. And he said, yeah. And she asks why. And he said, I wasn't sure then, but I am sure now that after 35 years, I am now convinced that man was Jesus Christ.

In caring for the poor, we get to dwell with God. What is better than that?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
