

Faith Focus on a Fair Budget September 25-26, 2010

Sponsored by:

COMMUNITY RENEWAL SOCIETY



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois



PROTESTANTS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

"People of faith advancing justice in public life"

As part of the Faith Table of the

Responsible Budget Coalition

Faith Focus on a Fair Budget

September 26, 2010

Invitation

We – members of the Faith Table of the Responsible Budget Coalition – invite you to unite with us to observe a “Faith Focus on a Fair Budget” on Saturday, September 25 and Sunday, September 26, 2010. Through prophetic preaching and teaching, clergy, ministers, and faith leaders across the state will lead their congregations in building awareness and discussing solutions to the Illinois State Budget crisis. “Faith Focus on a Fair Budget” will compel us to put our faith into action as we challenge our state and local leaders to consider the well being of all the people of Illinois as they make fiscal decisions that impact all of us.

As a state, we are in the midst of one of the greatest economic challenges we have ever faced. A total of 1.2 billion dollars has been cut from the state budget from government agencies from the 2010 fiscal year to 2011. Many communities – already facing tremendous challenges – are now bracing for more delays in bill payments and further funding reductions. The current economic recession coupled with cuts in the State budget – particularly in human services – have threatened many of the programs that help Illinoisans care for themselves and their loved ones.

Call to Action

In response to God’s concern for the well being of all people, we call upon people from all faith traditions to take these actions:

- Lead your congregation in observing a “Faith Focus on a Fair Budget.”
- Sign on to the Call to Action and urge others in your congregation to sign on as well.
- Send a letter to the editor of your local newspaper that calls for reform and revenue.
- Talk with others in your community about this urgent call to action.

Application

To support your planning for a “Faith Focus on a Fair Budget,” we offer you a variety of worship and teaching resources, including action tools, prayers, songs, lectionary studies, and reflections. We invite you to peruse these materials as you consider how you will lead your congregation in this significant event of worship, study, and action. A comprehensive list is provided in the Table of Contents. We have also provided a plan for an adult education session that relates the gospel passage of Luke 16:19-31 to the current fiscal crisis.

We give thanks for your prayers, witness, and action. Your leadership – along with the voices of your congregational members – is vitally important as we challenge our elected officials to act responsibly, invest in the future, and care for all persons in need.

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• Primary Readings: Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6. 14-16	
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Resources for Taking Action

RESPONSIBLE BUDGET COALITION: CALL TO ACTION

The RESPONSIBLE BUDGET COALITION is committed to building the support needed to solve Illinois' budget crisis by raising adequate revenue to prevent harmful cuts to essential services and jobs in the public and private sectors.

* We believe Illinois has a moral and legal obligation to protect public safety and health, strengthen our economy, and ensure that every individual has the opportunity to thrive. By forcing deep and damaging cuts to education, health care, human services and public safety, the current Illinois budget fails to meet those core obligations and undermines our state's chances for economic recovery.

* In addition, the state's failure to pay its bills in a timely manner has driven its bond rating lower while forcing creditors—including school districts and universities, medical and human services providers, public employees, small businesses and other vendors—to effectively lend the state government billions of dollars.

* Painful cuts have already been made, substantially reducing general state spending. Despite these cuts and a series of onetime revenue measures, the state continues to run a dramatic and unsustainable deficit.

* We call on every Illinois elected official and candidate to acknowledge that this fiscal crisis—brought on by the state's longstanding structural budget deficit and a national economic downturn—demands a balanced approach that includes significant new revenue.

* To protect vital services and jobs and enable economic recovery, at least 32 other states already have raised new revenues in the past year. Illinois must do the same. For the well being of our communities, for economic stability and for our children's future, we urge Illinois leaders to demonstrate responsible leadership and raise adequate revenue as soon as possible.

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RESPONSIBLE BUDGET COALITION: CALL TO ACTION SIGN-ON FORM

Yes! I / my organization (circle one) will answer the RESPONSIBLE BUDGET COALITION's Call to Action. I/we may be listed in support of the Coalition's principles.

Name of Organization: _____

Describe your organization (check one):

Individual ____ Business ____ Organization ____ Foundation ____

Other (Specify): _____

Is your organization (check one): Statewide ____ Local ____

Contact Person: _____

Title: _____

E-mail: _____

Agency/Org. Web site: _____

Address: _____

City _____ State ____ Zip _____

Phone #: _____

Fax #: _____

Signature: _____

Return This Form

by e-mail: to Maya Tillman at tillmanm@actforchildren.org, fax 773-561-2256 or call 773-697-6137

*Questions: John Bouman at johnbouman@povertylaw.org or call 312-368-2671
www.ABetterIllinois.com*

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Sample Letter to the Editor #1

These can be modified to include personal stories from your own community. Submitting a letter to the editor (LTE) is one of the best ways to bring public attention to an issue.

Dear Editor:

I just heard another story about the impact of budget cuts in my (our) community (state).

(Insert local story)

With an accumulated budget deficit of approximately \$13 billion, we know that there have to be cuts. But as a faith leader/pastor/lay leader in _____, I must point out that those cuts are hurting real people, their families and their communities.

The current state fiscal crisis did not happen overnight. For many years, both Democrats and Republicans have failed to reform our state's antiquated tax structure. It does not produce the revenue we need to fund adequately state services, especially during an economic recession.

To put it bluntly, we need a tax increase in Illinois.

We also need a line-by-line review of the state budget to remove any remaining waste or abuse, and we need measures to ease the unfair tax burden on those least able to bear the cost.

As a faith leader, I urge all candidates running for public office, to outline their plans for addressing these fiscal problems. I urge all voters to participate in problem-solving discussions with our neighbors, community leaders, public officials, and current candidates. I call on voters, candidates, and public leaders to support comprehensive tax reform that is fair and produces adequate revenue to continue vital services for all of our neighbors who cannot care for themselves and their families without our support.

Name

Address

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Sample Letter to the Editor #2

Dear Editor:

I just heard another story about the impact of budget cuts in my (our) community (state).

(Insert local story)

With an accumulated budget deficit of approximately \$13 billion, we know that there have to be cuts. But as a faith leader/pastor/lay leader in _____, I must point out that those cuts are hurting real people, their families and their communities.

I know that it is popular to complain about taxes. It is also easy to claim the problem is waste and corruption. Neither approach helps.

Yes, we need a line-by-line review of the state budget to remove any remaining waste or abuse. And, we need a mechanism to ease the unfair tax burden on those least able to bear the cost.

But, let's be honest with one another: we also need a tax increase.

As a faith leader, I call on voters, candidates, and public leaders to support comprehensive tax reform that is fairer and produces adequate revenue to continue vital services for all of our neighbors who cannot care for themselves and their families without our support.

All of us – elected officials, candidates, and voters alike must get involved in addressing the state's fiscal problems. It's the right thing to do. It's the moral thing to do.

Name

Address

Sample Adult Education Lesson

These lesson materials are intended to be distributed to all participants for a group discussion. For ease of discussion, one person may volunteer to lead/facilitate.

Opening prayer

(EX: Loving God, we live in the knowledge that Christ is coming to make all things new. Give us new eyes to see and new ears to hear Your good news today. Open our hearts and minds to what Your word has to say about our state, our budget, and our call to justice. Give us Your wisdom as we discern Your will for our communities. Amen.)

Opening Question:

How would the budget affect our community? Do we know people that work for the state or utilize state funded services?

(EX: Lutheran Social Services, Medicaid/Medicare, Public Libraries, etc)

Read Luke 16:19-31 and discuss:

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we see a great disparity between the lives of the wealthy (the rich man feasted sumptuously every day) and the poor (Lazarus longed for the scraps from the rich man's table).

What are some disparities between the lives of the rich and the poor in our state?

- Who receives the best education?
- Who is the most secure from crime or other threats to safety?
- Who must go without healthcare or health insurance?
- Who is the most vulnerable to illness/disability, job loss or economic crisis?

Some facts about the Illinois State Budget:

Nine out of every 10 dollars in the operating budget of Illinois is spent on 4 things:

- Public education
- Public Safety (i.e. violence prevention initiatives, state police)
- Healthcare (i.e. Medicaid, Medicare, health clinics)
- Human Services/Safety net (i.e. disability benefits, food stamps, need-based assistance)

This 26 billion dollar budget is facing a 13 billion dollar deficit.

Discussion Questions

- If we fail to generate new revenue (by raising taxes), who will be most affected?
- What would happen to Lazarus if he were living in Illinois today?
- Would Abraham speak any better of the rich in our society than he spoke of the rich man and his brothers?

The prophets' call to care for the poor:

Abraham said that the rich men did not listen to Moses and the prophets. What did the prophets have to say about the obligations that communities have to care for the poor?

Read Isaiah 58:1-10

Questions for discussion:

- The whole nation is held to account in this passage. How would we, as the state of Illinois, hold up to Isaiah's standards for righteousness?
- If we as a state are not obeying the call of the prophets to "break every yoke" by sharing our wealth with the Lazarus in our midst, what does the parable say about our own fate?
- If we, like the rich man and his brothers, have ignored the call of the prophets to provide for the poor in Illinois, how do we repent? What "true fast... to loose the bonds of injustice... to share [our] bread with the hungry" must we as the people of Illinois choose?

The Responsible Budget Coalition

The Responsible Budget Coalition, in collaboration with faith groups such as Community Renewal Society, Protestants for the Common Good, and Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, has called on Illinois to follow the lead of at least 32 other states that have raised new revenues in the past year to preserve vital services and protections for the least of these during these hard economic times.

We are fighting for:

- Increasing the individual income tax from 3% to 5%
- Increasing the corporate income tax
- And expanding the sales tax base to include the sale of luxury services

Read The Responsible Budget Coalition's *Call to Action* and discuss:

- As people of faith, how does this call to action speak to us?
- How does it relate to the scriptures we just read?
- What steps can we take as a church, to ensure that our state cares for the needy?

Suggested Action Steps:

- Have your church sign on to the principles of the Responsible Budget Coalition
- Contact your State Senators and State Representatives and urge them to pass a responsible budget that cares for the needy
 - To find out who your legislators are, go to <http://www.elections.illinois.gov/DistrictLocator/DistrictOfficialSearchByAddress.aspx>
 - Call your legislators
 - Write letters to your legislators
- Pray for our state and its leadership, that the call of the prophets would not fall on deaf ears.
- Attend October budget forums

Worship Materials

Calls to Worship

One: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!
Many: I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
One: Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help,
Many: When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.
One: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,
Many: Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
One: Who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
Many: The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
One: The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.
Many: The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,
One: But the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.
Many: The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.
All: Praise the Lord!

Psalm 146, New Revised Standard Version

One: Among the poor, among the proud,
Left: AMONG THE PERSECUTED
Right: AMONG THE PRIVILEGED,
All: *Christ is coming to make all things new.*
One: In the private house, in the public place
Left: IN THE WEDDING FEAST
Right: IN THE JUDGMENT HALL,
All: *Christ is coming to create community.*
One: With a gentle touch, with an angry word,
Left: WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE,
Right: WITH BURNING LOVE,
All: *Christ is coming to bring justice.*
One: That the kingdom might come, that the world might believe,
Left: THAT THE POWERFUL MIGHT STUMBLE,
Right: THAT THE HIDDEN MIGHT BE SEEN,
All: *Christ is coming to generate equity.*
One: Within us, without us, behind us, before us,
Left: IN THIS PLACE, IN EVERY PLACE,
Right: FOR THIS TIME, FOR ALL TIME,
All: *Christ is coming to make all things new.*

Adapted from a litany from Holy Covenant United Methodist Church, Chicago, August 15, 2010

Prayers of Confession

Loving God,

We confess that there are times when we want to turn away from the problems of our state. We pretend that they don't exist or we refuse to see their impact on our communities. We say they are someone else's concern or we blame someone else for our predicament. We fail to take responsibility for making hard decisions and we refuse to work with others to find solutions. We fear that we can't make a difference or we fear that working for change will offend our friends and co-workers.

Forgive us for our faint-heartedness. Forgive our failure to trust each other. Forgive us for refusing to hear your voice in the midst of our debates. Forgive us our inability to work with those with whom we disagree.

Remind us that you never up on others and you never give up on us. Amen.

Adapted from a prayer by Shannon Daley-Harris, National Observance of Children's Sabbaths Manual, Vol. 16, page 72

Gracious God,

We confess that we believe that we cannot solve these great problems. We want to give up – to give up on our legislative leaders, give up on the candidates running for office, give up on ourselves. We forget that you, O God, are a God of hope and reconciliation. We forget that you, O God, challenge us to put aside our differences. We forget that you, O God, call us to act justly and to show mercy.

Forgive us for our faint-heartedness. Forgive our failure to trust each other. Forgive us for refusing to hear your voice in the midst of our debates. Forgive us our inability to work with those with whom we disagree.

Remind us that you never up on others and you never give up on us. Amen.

Adapted from a prayer by Shannon Daley-Harris, National Observance of Children's Sabbaths Manual, Vol. 16, page 72

Prayers of the People

We pray for school children across the state. As the state's budget crisis deepens, our children suffer when school districts are forced to lay off teachers, cut programs, and reduce extracurricular activities. We pray that our state invests in the future of all the children of Illinois by providing quality education regardless of their family's income or where they live. God, in your mercy ...

Hear our prayer.

We pray for an end to violence in our communities. We grieve for the 258 public school students who were shot last year in Chicago, 32 fatally, on their way to or from school. As the state faces cuts, effective public safety and violence prevention programs are in jeopardy. We pray that our state will prioritize the safety of all children and adults by funding life-saving violence prevention in our communities. God, in your mercy ...

Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who suffer with chronic illnesses. We hear about children and adults who may lose their health care services as long-time agencies, like those serving individuals with epilepsy and children who are deaf and blind, are forced to close due to unpaid bills. Remind us of our responsibility for all of your children, and spur us to advocate on their behalf. God, in your mercy ...

Hear our prayer.

We pray for all our neighbors in need: those facing homelessness, people with disabilities, families living in poverty, children at risk of abuse or neglect, frail or isolated elders, and all others who cannot care adequately for themselves or their families. Push us to join with others and with state government to strengthen the human care safety net for all members of our communities. God, in your mercy ...

Hear our prayer.

Songs

Christ's Word to Us is Like a Burning Fire

Christ's word to us is like a burning fire,
Searing our hearts, our actions to inspire.
Burn deep within, O Christ, forgive and
cleanse.
Show us the world through God's own
perfect lens.

When we are bowed by grief, defeat, or fear,
Warm and ignite the fire of faith and cheer.
So may we be empowered to do the right,
Living from darkness into dawning light.

So shall the Word, still like a burning fire,
Be all the truth and wisdom we require,
Flashing new insight, making vision clear,
Revealing Christ among us now and here.

Jane Parker Huber, 1986

Let Justice Flow Like Streams

Let justice flow like streams
Of sparkling water, pure
Enabling growth, refreshing life,
Abundant, cleansing, sure.

Let righteousness roll on
As others' cares we heed,
An ever flowing stream of faith
Translated into deed.

So may God's plumb line, straight,
Define our measure true,
And justice, right, and peace pervade
This world our whole life through.

Jane Parker Huber, 1984

Other Songs

All Who Love and Serve Your City
Gather Us In
God of Justice, God of Mercy
God of Love and God of Power
Guide My Feet
Here I Am, Lord
Help Us Accept Each Other
I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me
Lift Every Voice and Sing
Oh, I Know the Lord's Laid His Hands on Me
There's a Wideness in God's Mercy
What Does the Lord Require
When a Poor One
When We Are Living

Benedictions

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with DISCOMFORT ...
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with ANGER ...
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS ...
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation, and war
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And to turn their pain into JOY.

And may God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS ...
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can DO what others claim cannot be done. Amen.

From National Observance of Children's Sabbaths Manual, Vol. 16, page 75

Go out into the world in peace;
Have courage;
Hold on to what is good;
Return no one evil for evil;
Strengthen the fainthearted;
Support the weak, and help the suffering;
Honor all people;
Love and serve the Lord
Rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Lectionary Studies

Lectionary readings for 18th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 26, 2010**

Primary Readings from Hebrew Scriptures: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16.

Readings from Epistle and Gospel: I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31.

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Relating the Reading to the Budget – Notes for Sermon or Teaching:

The story of Jeremiah in chapter 32 is a story of investing in one's community for the future even when the present time is bleak. Jeremiah believed that God was commanding him to buy land while at the same Israel was being defeated and its citizens were being removed from their homes and their cities to Babylonia. The future for Jeremiah seemed every bit as hopeless as the economic future of the state of Illinois does in 2010. We are too deeply in debt, our leaders continue to spend money in selfish pursuits while ignoring the plight of the very needy and our needs continue to grow all the while. What Jeremiah is telling us through his actions is that there is no hopeless time or place with God. God promises to restore our communities if we will be faithful with our resources.

Lectionary Study

This Sunday's reading from the prophets begins the gradual turn from judgment to hope in Jeremiah's prophetic mission. "Gradual" is the word, because Jeremiah did not offer any positive prospects to his contemporary society of stubborn rebels. It will be at least seventy years before any prospects of recovery can be looked for in Judah's devastated land (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:4-9, and especially verse 10).

Our passage has the same style and mood as the story about Jeremiah's visit to the potter that we read a few weeks back (Jeremiah 18:1-11). This is not impassioned visions and laments over the judgment and suffering of a wicked people and city. This is a very deliberate and reasoned presentation of a highly improbable message. Like the potter incident, this is **prophecy by symbolic action**, which the prophet experiences as guidance by God's word.

The narrative emphasizes the details of this symbolic transaction. You hear what is going to happen, then you hear it happen. You hear about both copies of the purchase deed, and you get details such as the earthen jar in which the deed copies are to be stored. You get the names and once even the grandfather's name of the principal players of the episode. This is being drawn out in detail as if it were the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. All for a simple message: "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (verse 15, NRSV).

The importance of the message must be seen against the background of **the occasion**. The city is under siege. It has been in rebellion against the world's main super-power for sometime, and will eventually hold out for a year and a half. This is a very long time for the great power to have to keep troops tied up around one modest fortified city. Ten years before, when Nebuchadnezzar first captured Jerusalem, the siege only lasted around three months. At that time Nebuchadnezzar was satisfied to simply deport major sections of the upper classes and

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replace the king who had rebelled with another member of the royal family. How is he going to respond now, when he captures the city, to make up for the great expense and delay of this rebellion?

He will be ruthless, and everything will be devastated! Every scrap of wealth will be taken away and all the people will die, be transported to distant lands, or dispersed if they would be of no social value as exiles. With this prospect for the capital city before every realistic observer, what is happening to real estate values, both here and in the suburbs? What will the demand for land in Anathoth (three miles north of Jerusalem) be when Nebuchadnezzar has finished this campaign?

That is the background of Jeremiah's purchase of the family land in Anathoth. When things look absolutely the worst for future prospects in this county, Jeremiah is directed by God to buy land. (His cousin Hanamel is no doubt delighted to find a gullible relative to purchase land that will probably be confiscated by Babylonians in a few weeks.) But note – it is not land for immediate use. It is for the distant future. The deed to this land is to be preserved in an earthen jar – hopefully secure enough to survive (perhaps in caves, like those near Qumran), to survive both the fall of the city and the years of abandonment that will follow.

This is one more step in Jeremiah's message (chapters 24 and 29) that the only hope for God's people lies through the Diaspora.

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

The Psalm reading is for those who survive the destruction of the city of refuge besieged by Nebuchadnezzar. When there is no earthly city available for God's faithful, they remain dependent on God. Being without a holy sanctuary, they are **not without God**. In their Diaspora is where they now "live in the shelter of the Most High," abide "in the shadow of the Almighty."

The first part of the psalm is assurance that there is such shelter for the faithful one. It is a promise, almost in spite of all odds. The dangers of such unprotected places in the world are drawn out. Safety from the "fowler," from epidemic in the land (pestilence); safety from terrors at night, from drive-by shootings in the daytime (verse 5), and from all the diseases that threaten by night or day. God's protected one will be secure from these.

These assurances are given to the individual. Diaspora is a life condition imposed first on individuals – which makes their communing together so much more important than in their old civic society. All the pronouns of Psalm 91 are singular. "You (singular) who live... who abide (singular)... (verse 1). When the great city is gone, each soul is alone with God. As other testimonies will make clear, this will lead to community, a community of survivors, one that is defined and shaped by having passed through God's judgment. For such a community of souls who love and trust God, God speaks directly but individually the promises of saving and well-being given in verses 14-16.

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I Timothy 6:6-19

Relating the Reading to the Budget – Notes for Sermon or Teaching:

When Timothy urges the rich to share their wealth with the poor, he is not suggesting sacrificial living. Timothy believes that generous giving and generous living leads to a “contented” life. Timothy urges us to shun self-indulgence and to pursue righteousness, godliness, love, endurance and gentleness. As our commentator says, Timothy challenges us to “take hold of the life that is really life” (v.19). Giving to others does not hurt, but rather enriches both the giver and the recipient. In this case the State budget is the giver and the citizens of Illinois are the recipients. Or, “He ain’t heavy, he is my brother (sister).”

Lectionary Study

The Epistle reading, like so many other readings this season, places the gospel in **opposition to seeking riches**. First, there IS “gain” for the believer, who attains at least a godly life and “contentment” (sufficiency for life’s needs, see II Corinthians 9:8, where the same word is used). It is the nature of life that we brought nothing into the world with us and will take nothing out with us. And yet – the temptation is before us of wanting to become rich. Thus, “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (verse 10, NRSV), and even leads some to abandon their faith.

But the Apostle makes an urgent appeal, in what may be liturgical or hymnic language, to avoid such lures to destruction.

But you, O person of God, flee such things;
pursue righteousness, godliness, faith,
love, endurance, gentleness.
Fight the good fight of the faith,
seize the life of the [coming] age,
to which you were called
and confessed the good confession
before the witness of many. (verses 11-12, my translation)

The believer is to imitate Jesus in the “good confession” he made before Pontius Pilate. (This is the only mention of Pilate in the New Testament outside the Gospels and Acts.) The “commandment” – all the instructions for the faithful – is to be kept until Jesus’ manifestation at the end time, to whom a doxology is chanted in verses 15-16.

But the Apostle seems to recognize that there are some of the faithful who will be rich – and will not cease to be so immediately. Guidance for them is given in verses 17-19, consisting mostly of urging them to seek the riches of righteousness and generosity rather than of the world. By so doing, they may yet “take hold of the life that is really life” (verse 19).

Luke 16:19-31

Relating the Reading to the Budget – Notes for Sermon or Teaching:

While it may be true (perhaps) that our legislators do not know all who are sick and who are poor in Illinois, it is also true that many people plead the causes of the poor and the dispossessed every year before the state legislature. Therefore, the state knows who the poor are, but whenever budgetary funds run low, too often the ones who are told to suffer without are those same poor. Sometimes the poor are singled out and a particular single mom or handicapped person makes their appeal. Sometimes the poor are the school who teach and even feed our children, or sometimes the poor are agencies who provide services for the poor. Everyone in a capitalistic democracy is encouraged to make all the money he/she can. Jesus does not make a claim that wealth is bad, but rather that unless compassion and sharing of that wealth follows, God is very displeased.

Lectionary Study

And when we pass to the Gospel reading, the issue of wealth and greater rewards meets us in the classic story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. (The story is not called a parable in the text – except in a couple of manuscripts – but interpreters invariably classify it as such.)

The emphasis here is on **the great disparity** during their earthly lives between the wealthy and the poverty-stricken. The rich man is extremely rich, one who dressed exquisitely and dined sumptuously every day. Lazarus (the only figure given a name in Jesus' parables), lying right outside the entrance to the mansion (through some lapse in local vagrancy laws) was extremely poor, hoping for only some table crumbs. Both the poor man and the rich man died and went to their rewards – and here is where the real story begins.

The rich man burns in hell while the poor man luxuriates in banquet companionship with old patriarch Abraham (one of the clearest Biblical descriptions of this folklore view of the afterlife). The rich man looks up and pleads with Abraham for a little relief from the fire of hell, but Abraham declares that there is an uncrossable abyss between heaven and hell. (“You can’t get here from there!”) The rich man had his rewards in the earthly life; now he pays the price.

Abandoning hope for himself, the rich man has an altruistic urge and asks that Lazarus be sent to warn the rich man’s five brothers, who are still living it up in earthly plenty. The reply is that they have Moses and the prophets, the law and the words of judgment and promise. If the living will not learn their responsibility from these, there is no hope for them, and even a dead man raised back to life will not convince them. (The Lazarus who is raised in the Gospel According to John, chapter 11, does not look like our poor man of Luke’s parable, but the scoffing opponents are not convinced by that resurrection from the dead either.)

(A note on the name Lazarus, which is a shortened form of the name Elazar: “The name *’El’āzār* means ‘God has helped,’ and it is a fitting name for the beggar in this parable, who was not helped by a fellow human being, but in his afterlife is consoled by God,” Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, X-XXIV*, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1985, p. 1131.)

This story of the rich man and the poor man further confirms, in a more folksy way, the great abyss that this Gospel places between the rich and the saved (compare 6:20 and 24, the rich fool in 12:13-21, comments in 12:32-34, and “mammon” in 16:9-13). This story insists that all have

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the scriptures to guide and warn them. Such warning should make the extreme disparity between great wealth and great poverty unacceptable to the human community.

It also insists that at some point it is too late. The abyss in judgment, cutting off the chance to return to faithfulness to God in one's living, will come – leaving only the fires of hell in place of extreme wealth.

So it was told as Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem.

Selected Scriptures on the Theme of Justice

For those congregations which prefer to choose their own scripture passages for worship, we offer the following references to support your planning:

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

Proverbs 14:23

Proverbs 31:8-9

Isaiah 10:1-2

Isaiah 58:6-10

Amos 5:21-24

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 22:35-37

Matthew 25:31-46

Luke 4:16-21

Reflections

I. State has moral obligation to get budget in line

One of the interesting questions about the Illinois budget disaster is how we will know when we are bankrupt. One fiscal guru told me that this won't happen as long as we can borrow and are willing to pay interest rates that would shame even the most profligate.

Another said that we are already there. Isn't it bankruptcy when agencies — especially those serving the desperately needy — are forced to shut down because they have not been paid for services rendered?

We are certainly bankrupt by any reasonable moral, if not technical, standard. John Buchanan, senior minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, has written, "Nations are judged on how they deal with their own weakest, most vulnerable citizens — the least of these." States, too.

We are failing to realize that behind every grim budget number is a real, live person, a neighbor whom we should care about. Consider one such person, who spoke to a gathering of my organization last week.

Dante grew up in Chicago public housing. His mother had 14 children. Only four are now alive. All the others died from drug overdose or violence. His mother was functionally illiterate. A lot of men moved in and out of her life. He carries a scar on his head from her violence.

Dante managed to do well through high school and entered the military after two years in college. He returned home to care for his mother. When she died, and his brother suffered an AIDS-related death, suddenly everything seemed too much for him. He turned to drugs. Eventually he found treatment and is now a counselor himself in a halfway house setting.

I will long remember his opening comments.

"I have always had this thought that no soul really has a choice about where it's born or how God chooses to bring that soul to Earth," he said. "You know, I could have been a Cambodian rice farmer, a Russian midget in the circus, so many other things, but God chose me for a purpose. I was born into an African-American family on the South Side of Chicago, in poverty, in Robert Taylor homes."

At the very least, these words call us to empathy. If we take seriously his observation that none of us has a choice about the circumstances to which we are born, doesn't it follow that each of us could be facing his struggles?

Circumstances separate us, perhaps more now than ever before. But if much of this separation is due to chance — or at least things over which we have no choice — isn't it also true that what we have in common with each other is far more significant than what separates us?

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told us of the ways we are connected to each other. This is tangibly true: “We are everlasting donors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning . . . we reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs, we are already beholden to more than half the world.”

But our connectedness is also spiritually true. Social activist and preacher William Sloane Coffin was paraphrasing Dr. King when he asked: “ ‘Am I my brother’s keeper? No, I am my brother’s brother or sister. Human unity is not something we are called upon to create, only to recognize.’ ”

If we were to take more seriously the Dantes of this world, perhaps we would begin to pay a little more attention to the state budget crisis as well.

Written by The Rev. Alexander E. Sharp, Executive Director of Protestants for the Common Good. Originally published as an opinion editorial piece in the Chicago Sun-Times on July 28, 2010.

II. Faith Letter

Dear Leaders of the General Assembly,

Perhaps there is no better statement to describe the state’s fiscal crisis than the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. (“I Have a Dream,” 1963)

As faith leaders, we are called to stand with and advocate for marginalized communities, families in need, under-employed workers, uninsured professionals, and those who are homeless, aged, or disabled. We walk with them in our churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and communities and bear witness to their struggles and suffering. We speak on their behalf because, too often, their voices are not heard in the political process.

With the Responsible Budget Coalition (RBC), we share a vision of a moral and just society and urge you to pass a fair budget that fulfills the state’s obligation to the people of Illinois. Now more than ever, we and all the people of Illinois need leadership from you. The time to address the structural imbalance in our state’s budget is long past due.

There is a clear path and statewide support to do just that. House Bill 174 is a good solution, and it has already passed the Senate. With statewide support, HB 174 provides the House of Representatives the opportunity to put Illinois on the road to being ‘whole’ again by allowing Illinois to pay its bills on time, provide vital services, and regain the trust and confidence of taxpayers.

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Our diverse religious traditions are very clear; our creator, however named or recognized, is especially concerned for those pushed the furthest down in our society. The poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien, those dealing with physical and mental challenges are already adversely affected by the Illinois budget situation. As a state, we must assure that we cause no further harm to the people already in jeopardy because of our collective indifference to their suffering.

We urge you to support HB 174! While we understand the political difficulties, the God we serve challenges us to lay them aside and act to provide the just and moral budget the people of Illinois deserve.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Denver Bitner, President/CEO
Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Jane Ramsey, Executive Director
Jewish Council on Urban Affairs

Rev. Calvin S. Morris, PhD, Executive Director
Community Renewal Society

Rev. Alexander Sharp, Executive Director
Protestants for the Common Good

Bishop Wayne Miller, Metropolitan Chicago Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Warren Freiheit, Central/Southern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Gary Wollersheim, Northern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, Northern Illinois Conference
The United Methodist Church

Bishop Sharon Rader, Ecumenical Officer
The United Methodist Church

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee, Bishop of Chicago
Episcopal Church

Presented to the Governor and Members of the Illinois General Assembly on February 16, 2010