

Congressman Les AuCoin
Forest Grove United Church
Forest Grove, Oregon
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Good morning to each of you. I want to thank the congregation for the invitation to stand here today.

You can't imagine how nice it is to be back home in Forest Grove. I think I can safely speak for my whole family -- my daughter Stacey, my son Kelly and my wife Sue,-- when I say that returning here always gives us a sense of renewal.

In fact, I still remember the night before we left for Washington the first time. It was late on New Year's Eve, 1974. We were leaving early the next day for the train station. The house was empty, our furnishings having been shipped across the country except for our beds for that one last night in our home in Forest Grove.

When Sue had finished putting the last items in our suitcases, I walked by my son Kelly's bedroom and heard him finishing up his prayers as he contemplated leaving Oregon.

I didn't hear the first part, but he finished by saying: "Well, God, I guess this is it -- we're heading for Washington!"

It may be heresy in this house, but I think that tells you for the AuCoin family, Oregon is only a couple of steps away from the promised land.

This morning I want to commend your congregation for the interest you have shown in the subject I came to speak about.

It's a very personal subject -- and a very troubling one.

It's a story of suffering, of human misery on a scale so vast that most Americans find it impossible to comprehend.

It's a story about something you and I take for granted -- but which 700 million people in this world do without daily.

Of course, I'm talking about food. After the air we breathe and the water we drink, it's the most basic and essential of human needs.

And as we gather here this morning, this subject has seldom been as timely as it is now -- as the world watches the horror of mass human starvation in Cambodia and at the same time, the famine and deprivation in Vietnam which has given the world the Boat People.

My message this morning will be a mixture of thoughts dealing with our faith, our sense of morality, and the realm of government -- because the answers to the problem of hunger demand all three of these.

In my remarks, I have drawn from the books of Exodus, Ezekiel and Matthew, a study called Goals for Mankind published by the Club of Rome, and congressional studies.

I also have drawn from a fascinating friendship with a popular song-writer whom many of you know -- Harry Chapin. It was a great pleasure to meet Harry nearly three years ago when we both were honored by the United States Jaycees.

We talked for hours about his work in the field of world hunger -- and I haven't been quite the same since.

Shortly after that meeting with Chapin, I ran across an article in TIME Magazine which was a clincher for me. The article concerned America's bumper harvest that season. There, in vivid color, we saw surplus grain dumped by the ton onto the main street of Marshall, Oklahoma because the storage bins were already filled to capacity.

That same magazine also published another story. This was a story about drought south of the Sahara and starvation in Bangladesh. Punctuating the gray statistics were photographs -- photographs of children with hollow eyes and swollen bellies, pleading in their silent way for someone, anyone, to help them.

The contrast of those two stories tugs at your conscience and demands something from you.

Today, I want to talk about the facts of world hunger. The fact is food production on Planet Earth is sufficient to feed all of its people. Yet a half billion human beings are starving. Nearly 20 million children under the age of 5 will die this year because of malnutrition.

Each day the world produces enough grain to provide 3,000 calories to each person on the globe, or about as much as the average Western person eats.

So why are people hungry? Because food follows money. And the world's food distribution system doesn't deal with abundance in the industrial world on the one hand and the extreme poverty of the underdeveloped world on the other.

The system actually produces cruel ironies. African nations regularly export barley, beans, cattle, peanuts, and vegetables -- even though Africa has the worst malnutrition of any continent. They do it because food follows money -- not hungry bellies.

On our side, Americans are the major consumers of grain-fed meat and poultry. And so we support one of the most wasteful food practices ... because only 10 per cent of the vegetable protein fed to animals is converted into animal protein. In this country, this represents a waste of 18 million tons of grain a year.

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR reported in 1975 that a mere 20 percent shift away from grain fed beef would "free enough grain and concentrate to meet the entire 9 million-ton famine relief need estimated at the United Nations World Food Conference.

This morning, I would like to ask you this: What responsibility do professed Christians have in a hungry world? And what responsibility do we have, as a nation based on Judeo-Christian principles, to the "Lesser Developed Countries?"

Many Americans believe we already are meeting or exceeding our obligations to the world's needy. A recent poll by the Presidential Commission on World Hunger revealed Americans are highly supportive of efforts to alleviate world hunger. Approximately 8 out of 10 Americans favor keeping U.S. government programs at the same funding level or even increasing them.

A survey taken last year also discovered that although 52 percent of the American public support the principle of foreign aid, 69 percent of all Americans think the United States is more generous in foreign aid than other developed nations.

Beyond the fact that several countries do more than we do, we should ask how this benevolent self-image squares with current efforts to eradicate hunger. A timely example is Cambodia. Before the war, Cambodia had a population of about 8 million. Today, after starvation and ruthless executions, the population is about 4 million. That's half of the Cambodian people. And half of the remaining Cambodians are dying from hunger. That's almost the number of Jews who were killed in Nazi concentration camps. What we're talking about is nothing less than the eradication of an entire people if assistance does not arrive immediately.

I'm convinced these problems can be solved if we act -- decisively and imaginatively. As a world leader, we're in a position to make the difference. This week 68 members of the House urged that our government propose a joint U.S.-Soviet relief effort to remove international politics from this tragedy and begin to save an entire race of people.

Similar devastation haunts Vietnam. With its vast agricultural network destroyed by the war and with 8 million farm residents displaced, Vietnam suffered its worst flooding in more than a decade last year. The result was an estimated 4 million ton annual shortfall of rice; 40 per cent of Vietnam's agricultural land lying fallow; and 4.1 million people on the edge of malnutrition. Many, faced with economic oblivion, near starvation and slow death, have opted for a desperate flight from their homeland. They are the Boat People, 50 percent of whom die at sea. In May alone, 46,000 people -- or the equivalent of four Forest Groves -- fled Vietnam.

Both the Old and New Testaments are clear in urging us to care for those less fortunate than ourselves.

Exodus 23:6: "You shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother: But you shall open your hand wide unto him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need.

In Matthew we are commanded to meet the human, as well as the spiritual requirements of the needy. Christ admonished us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned. The message is inescapable: We are to love and care for others as we do ourselves.

In the short term, the United States must assume a leadership role in providing humanitarian aid. But the challenge goes deeper.

The fact is this earth can feed its people. We have the technical capacity to address the problem. We have the resources to address the problem.

What we lack is the will to name world hunger a priority.

For the hungry nations of the world, this means the will to tackle such difficult problems as land reform and rural development, even if it means shifting scarce capital resources from urban industrialization in order to increase food production. For them it means investing in people and know-how, not merely in advanced production mechanisms. It means breaking down the institutional and economic barriers to social progress, thereby overcoming the numbing and hope-sapping poverty which afflicts millions of people in rural areas.

For industrialized nations, especially the United States, it means the will to understand the true needs of hungry people and to commit ourselves to meeting those needs with local solutions.

That means we can't expect to export many of our own agriculture techniques to other nations. Our technology isn't the boon to developing nations that it was trumped up to be a few years ago because it's too expensive for the local small farmer. The huge investments in machinery, irrigation, chemicals, pesticides, and the like can only be handled by the large farmer. But he's the least likely to market his crops locally. His huge investment requires that he export his crop for the highest price he can get.

The real solution for hunger is for the hungry to grow food to feed themselves.

As a first step in this direction, food aid to hungry nations must be increased. The World Food Council notes that such aid still falls short of the annual 10 million ton goal for grain set by the United Nations World Food Conference in 1974. Even that modest goal is below the 12 million ton a year average that prevailed before 1972.

But aid alone is not enough -- and this gets us back to the need to help the hungry grow their own food.

If developing nations are to avoid a projected food gap from 120 to 145 million tons a year by 1990, they will have to boost their own food production.

It was a Chinese proverb which said that to give a man a fish is to give him a meal; but to teach a man to fish is to let him eat for the rest of his life. Let us commit ourselves to teach -- but teach techniques that are relevant to the countries involved rather than the self-defeating attempt to export U.S. agri-business techniques.

If we do these things, what can we expect in return?

A greater sense of morality and justice, certainly. But I see a number of other benefits to the United States. First and foremost is the political stability and global order which can come from true economic and social progress in areas of the world where the promise of such things is the grist of revolution.

My friends, as Americans we have been given much, and I happen to think for that reason much is expected of us. The question is: Will we as individuals and as a nation, be like Sodom in the Book of Ezekiel and arrogantly refuse to use our resources to help the poor and needy, or will we take up the challenge to meet the human needs of others?

I ask you think about that this day. And when considering this challenge, you may want to reflect once again on the following charge we are given in the Book of Matthew -- which is the New Testament lesson you've chosen for today:

"Lord, when did we see You hungry, and not feed You, or thirsty, and not give You drink, and when did we see You a stranger, and not invite You in, or naked, and not clothe You? And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it for Me.'"