

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
October 16, 2016
Rich Stearns—World Vision
The Future of Poverty | Matthew 28:18-20**

Well good morning everybody. It's great to be at CPC on a beautiful Minnesota morning just days before the snow fall begins in this state. I was afraid I was coming too late and it would already be on the ground when I arrived. You have a reputation for snow!

You know, this church has a very special place in my heart. I am now in my nineteenth year at World Vision, and when I first arrived here, people in the office kept telling me about this amazing church in Minnesota that had been such a good partner with us in Uganda. Then as fate would have it, my very first trip to Africa as the president of World Vision was to Rakai, Uganda, the very community in which this church had invested with World Vision over a number of years. When I went to Rakai, the Ugandans were telling me about this amazing church in Minnesota, and so I knew that when I got back to the states, I was going to actually have to make a trip to Minnesota to meet the pastor of this church. So probably around 1999 or thereabouts, I had an opportunity to meet John Crosby, your pastor. So it isn't surprising that when World Vision needed a new board member who understood the vital role that churches could play in our world, John was at the top of the list. He has been on our board for about fifteen years. He also now serves on the international board of World Vision and I just want you to know he has been a tremendous contributor and he's become a great friend; Laura and John have become great friends of Rene and myself, and I wanted to thank this church and especially the board of elders, because I know that loaning your pastor out for multiple board meetings and international trips is a sacrifice that this church makes, but I want you to know he's been an incredible statesman for the role of the church in the world as he serves both here and internationally, so we're just really grateful to have him walking with us in this ministry and also to know that this church walks with us as well, so thank you.

Now, it's probably not a big surprise today that I want to speak to you about the poorest people in our world—the least of these as the Bible calls them, but I'm going to take a little different approach than you might think, because I want you to see something of tremendous significance, a mega-trend that's happening in the world today that has profound implications for the mission of the church in the world, and then a little bit later on I'm going to use the Syrian refugee crisis as an example of this trend. I'm going to speak to you about what I call the future of poverty and how that future trajectory of poverty is going to impact the world and the church over the next few decades.

Anybody who reads the international headlines regularly these days is probably

chronically depressed by what they read. Sometimes it just seems like our world is coming apart at the seams. North Korea continues to rattle its saber with nuclear tests. Russia is flexing its muscles again in places like Ukraine and now in Syria and the Middle East. The rise of Isis in Iraq and Syria has been horrifying and it's led to a global resurgence in terrorism. Paris, Brussels, Beirut, Orlando, San Bernardino . . . these are no longer just the names of cities, these names now evoke images of terror, and destruction, and violence. Two years ago we were all shocked by the outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa, worried that it was going to spread across the globe and now we're worried about the growing threat of the Zika Virus coming out of Latin America. There are civil wars in South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The country of Zimbabwe is unstable and may fall into civil war over the next few years. Did you know there are 52 active civil wars and insurgencies raging across our world in almost every region of the globe? And as we also know from the news, there are now more than 65 million refugees, more than at any time since World War II.

Okay, now you need to take a deep breath. It's Sunday and it's beautiful outside, but all of these headlines, don't they put things in perspective? You know, like maybe the Eagles/Vikings game next Sunday isn't as important as we all think? How do we as Christians process all of these headlines? As parents and grandparents of young people, how do we feel about this world that is unfolding that our children and grandchildren live in and will inherit? What does all of this mean for the Church of Jesus Christ and its mission in the world? These are the questions I find myself wrestling with every single day at World Vision, but here's a truth that we can claim: the people of God have always been called to contend with a dangerous, broken, and rebellious world. The world that Jesus entered in the first century was every bit as dangerous, broken, and rebellious as the world of today. And so, it's important for us to remember that this world that we read about in the newspapers is still the same world that God so loved "that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life".

You see, headlines notwithstanding, God still loves the world and every person in it, and fortunately, God is not rattled by these headlines. The truth of the Gospel and God's plan for His church don't change. They don't change from century to century or millennia or millennia. He still calls His church into the world's pain with His redemptive message of hope, and healing, and peace, and forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Now before I go deeper into some of these geopolitical issues, I want to remind you of the two theological foundations that define the purpose of the church in the world. There's really two things that essentially define the mission of the church in the world. First, the church of Jesus Christ has been sent into the world—actually commanded to go to all the nations. In John chapter 20, when Jesus appears to His disciples just after His resurrection, this is what He tells them: He says: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am now sending you." You see, as followers of Jesus we are a

sent people. In Matthew 28, just before the ascension of our Lord, Jesus gets even more specific as He imparts to us what we know today as the Great Commission.

He says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [Matthew 28:18-20]

You see, this is a vision for all nations, not some nations, for all people, not some people, and for all time. And right after Jesus said those words, he left. The ascension occurred and the disciples returned to Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit and then to go into the world to accomplish the mission that Christ had given them.

So the implication of this Great Commission is that all of us as Christians must be engaged in the world—we must be engaged in the great issues of our day even when we don’t feel like it. Frankly I understand it would be much more convenient to retreat from all of those problems. I’m tempted to turn off the news sometimes when it’s on and to retreat into our comfort zones. If we could just put it out of sight and out of mind, life would be so much more pleasant, but I don’t believe God have given us that option.

So what’s the second foundation of the mission of the church and the world? It’s been called the Great Commandment: “To love our neighbors as ourselves.” It’s found most prominently in Luke 10 with the story of the Good Samaritan and here, Jesus commands us—*as we go into the world*—to be people of compassion. People who take seriously His special concern for the poor, His special concern for the downtrodden, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and yes, the refugee, and what do these two—the Great Commission and the Great Commandment—require of the church of the followers of Jesus Christ? They require us to go into the brokenness of our world. They call us to go to the harder places, the hostile places, the ragged edges where human suffering is most profound—not just to proclaim the Good News with our lips, although we do that, but to be the Good News of God’s love in action—the hands and feet of Christ active in the world. You see, Jesus sent us into the suffering of our world to take up the cause of the poor, to take up the cause of the immigrant and the stranger; to come alongside those who are struggling here and around the world, to fight on behalf of people who have been mistreated, to bring hope to the hopeless. And when we go, when we take with us the Good News of the Gospel; that forgiveness and reconciliation with God is now freely available through the death and sacrifice of Jesus. When we do all of this with energy and passion, it actually changes the world, it moves the needle in the world, it makes the world a better place. This is the breathtaking assignment that Jesus gave to His followers—the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Well, with those theological foundations behind us, let me go back to my earlier comments about the ugly headlines and the condition of our world, and since I’ve given

you the bad news, I actually want to leave you with some good news today because there is a lot to celebrate in the world. You know, I live in the world of International Relief and Development, and in this world that I travel in, tremendous strides have been made in the last twenty-five years in addressing the most extreme poverty on the planet. Some of these things I'm going to share with you would have been unimaginable just fifty years ago.

New York Times Columnist, Nicholas Kristof, wrote a column last month with the title *The Best News You Don't Know* and here's what he says, "Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering. The world's best-kept secret is that we live at an historic inflection point when extreme poverty is retreating." Now this is astonishingly good news. Listen to this: more people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in the last twenty-five years than in all the rest of human history. Maternal mortality in childbirth, as an example, has been reduced by almost half since 1990. Bearing a child is no longer a death sentence to a woman in a developing world. Hunger has been slashed by almost half. The percent of people chronically malnourished has dropped by 45% since 1990. The number of people with no access to clean water . . . in 1990 half the planet did not have access to clean drinking water, 2.8 billion people . . . today it's just about 670 million who still need clean water, but two billion have received it just in twenty-five years—and by the way, World Vision is the largest provider of clean water in the developing world. Our programs, some of them supported by this church, provide clean water and sanitation to about 2.5 million people every year. Now, the statistic we look at very carefully at World Vision because we're a child-focused ministry is child mortality, under 5-years-old child mortality. I looked at that children's choir today and I thought most of them are about 5-years-old. I've been in communities where one out of five children don't make it to their fifth birthday. One out of five children don't make it to their fifth birthday. In 1990, 35,000 children died every day before their fifth birthday of preventable causes. Today it's under 17,000. Now 17,000 is still way too many children dying, but it's half of what it was just in 1990. These are stunning achievements for the world.

In more stable countries like Zambia, where CPC has been invested recently, we are actually winning the war against extreme poverty. I want to read you a quote from a letter sent to your church by Chief Steven Moyo from the Moyo Area Development Community where we work together, and Chief Moyo is a politician. In Africa the chiefs are kind of the politicians that govern the communities, and like all politicians, he's a bit prideful and he was reflecting on his legacy and how he would be remembered and here's what he said:

"There are two things you can be remembered for. For being bad is one. I don't want that. I want to be remembered for my success. I can now proudly be remembered for the secondary school, and the hospital, for the VIP latrines, and

the boreholes. We'd had people who moved away to find better services. Now they say, 'Can we come back?' Our children now have friends in the USA."

I think he's referring to Edina, Minnesota where some of his children now have friends. And his last words: "With your help, impossibles will become very possible." I don't know if he "tweets", but that would be a very good tweet. "Impossibles will become very possible with your help." So Chief Moyo is personally experiencing in his community how countries like Zambia are now transitioning from under-developed countries to rapidly developing economies thanks to the generosity of ministries and churches like yours. It is not an exaggeration for me to stand here today and to say to you that globally the most extreme poverty on the planet is retreating. It is withdrawing, it is on the run. The question is where it is retreating to?

Now I want to give you a glimpse of where that poverty is retreating to and what I call the future of poverty because this is what I think has implications for the church. You know, the famous hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, once was asked to explain the secret of his success on the ice and he replied, "It's simple. I don't skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck is going to be." If we want to win this war against extreme poverty we need to know where the puck of poverty is headed. Poverty is increasingly retreating into what various think tanks call fragile states. In layman's terms, a fragile state is a broken country with either a corrupt or incompetent government. They're often characterized by religious conflicts, violence, human rights abuses, many forms of injustice. Fragile states are the hardest places in the world to be a child or to be a woman. To make it even plainer, these are increasingly the countries where the poorest of the poor, the 'least of these', now live. They have names like Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Congo, Burundi, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Korea.

Listen to just a few of these statistics. Bear with me because they're important: The fifty most fragile countries rank order in the world account for about twenty percent of the world's people; twenty percent of the world's people live there.

- 50% of the extreme poverty in our world is in those countries
- 60% of the world's hunger
- 65% of the people who lack clean water
- 70% of all under five child deaths

So these are the places where extreme poverty is making its last stand. Now, there's two things I want you to see. First, as these numbers show, these broken countries are now the home of the poorest of the poor on our planet, and second, two thirds of the people living in these countries are non-Christian—in fact they're about sixty percent Muslim. What I want you to see in this is of great importance to the church. It is that The Great Commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves and to care for the

poorest of the poor, is now pointing the church specifically to these fragile countries, And the Great Commission, to take the gospel to those who have not heard it or embraced it, is pointing us to the very same countries. It's almost like God has put two flaming arrows on the map to show his church the places in our world that He is now calling us to go. But here's the problem—they are not easy places in the world to work and go; they are the toughest places in the world. They are dangerous and often hostile. Their governments are weak, corrupt, and sometimes belligerent. And most of them are culturally foreign to us and often inaccessible. You can't take the eighth grade youth group to Somalia, or South Sudan, or Syria to do a work project, although you might be tempted to take your eighth graders there with a one-way ticket. This, in my opinion, is the challenge, the great challenge, of missions in the twenty-first century. It's the challenge in which I believe the church must rise, and this global trend lies at the heart of World Vision's new strategy. We are already working in ten of the top twelve most fragile countries in the world and we're working inside thirty-three of the top fifty, so in about two-thirds of them, we're already in there working on the problems.

Well, I want to do a case study now. The Syrian refugee crisis and the related crisis in Iraq . . . these two countries could be poster children for the fragile states message I just gave to you. If we seriously believe the theology I shared a few minutes ago, then this refugee crisis is going to be a real test of putting our faith into action. I can tell you that this is certainly testing World Vision as we struggle to get our arms around a human crisis that is massive in size and dangerous in nature, and it's also unpopular still with American Christians, so finding support for this crisis is hard.

I want to give you an overview of what we're facing in the Middle East, and most importantly today, I want you to leave having a different picture of the humanity and the face of refugees. Most Americans have no idea of the scale and the scope of this crisis. There are twelve million that have been displaced from Syria, there are three million more that have been displaced in Iraq for a total of fifteen million, but that number is too big to grasp, so I want you to imagine the following in your mind. I want you to imagine that every man, woman, and child in the following American cities had to run from their homes suddenly, maybe tomorrow morning, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the money in their pockets. Every home, every hospital, every nursing home had to empty out running for their lives in the cities – imagine this: San Diego, Dallas, San Jose, Albuquerque, Austin, Jacksonville, San Francisco, Indianapolis, Columbus, Fort Worth, Charlotte, Detroit, Seattle, Denver, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, Boston, Nashville, and let's bring it close to home and add Minneapolis/Saint Paul. That's the size of the refugee crisis. That's what it means in terms of human suffering. And eighty percent of these refugees are children, women, and the elderly.

I met a grandmother earlier this year in Lebanon. She's caring for these three small children, her grandchildren, in a 10 by 10 tent, and winter is coming into Lebanon as we speak. As this woman fled from Syria with her family, her husband was killed, the

mother of these children was killed, her son went missing who's the father of these children, and as I sat with this woman and these children with several pastors who went with me on the trip, she cried for an hour as she told us her story. "What will I do?" she said, "What will become of these children? How can I raise these children like this?" You see a massive wound has been opened in the Middle East caused by this war and human beings are pouring out of this wound like a river of blood. It is the worst human catastrophe of our time, and the people that are running from this violence need everything—they need all of the basics of life—food, water, toilets, shelter, clothing, schools, but just as important, they need to know that the world hasn't forgotten them. They need a hand of friendship in their hour of need, and they need just a little of something that none of us can live very long without, and that's hope. Hope for the future.

I want to introduce you to two of the children caught in this nightmare. The first is a young boy named Adil who ran from Syria and made it to Lebanon with his mother and sisters. I'm going to let Adil speak in a three minute video and you'll see this little boy on the left in the tent.

[Link to video] https://www.dropbox.com/s/kds325x7rbt2g2v/Syria%20Adel_lg%20subs.mp4?dl=0

This little boy named Adil is now the man of his family. You can tell that he's taking that responsibility seriously, and he's a heartbreaking example of the seven-and-a-half million children who have had to flee from Syria and Iraq and were unlucky enough—what did they do wrong? —they were unlucky enough to be born in those countries five-ten years before the horrible civil war and the rise of ISIS broke out. Many of them, like Adil, have witnessed loved ones or family members killed, and a whole generation of Syrian children are no longer in school. We have to ask what will become of this lost generation in ten or twenty years? We can only imagine what will become of them.

The next child I want you to meet is a ten year-old girl named Haya who I met in Jordan a couple of years back. Haya and her mother and her sisters also fled Syria and are now refugees in a massive tent camp in Jordan that holds 80,000 people. My friend Bill Hybels went to the same camp earlier this year, and when he got back he described it as a barbed wire cage containing 80,000 human beings. He'd never seen anything like it. Barbed wire as far as the eye could see. When I arrived, Haya had written me a letter which she read aloud, and she had prepared the night before because she knew someone important from the United States was coming - It was a cry for help from a little girl and I think she would be pleased if I read an excerpt of her letter. She says:

Peace to you. I am talking to you on behalf of the Syrian children, calling on you, the people of the other world. Have you ever thought of the children of Syria—my country Syria? Syria is in pain, Syria is bleeding. Syria is crying for her children. Her children were her candles and they have faded out. Please, my name is Haya and my father was killed. I loved my father so much and now I will never see him again.

I think Haya's letter was not just written to me, but was written to all of us here today because you see, we are those people of the other world that Haya wrote about. A world that's more peaceful, a world where life can go on with some sense of normalcy, and her question haunts me every day: *Have you ever thought of the children of Syria?* But here's my problem as World Vision's leader—we have found very little interest in the children of Syria among American Christians. If we look at the brutal facts nationally—five years into this crisis, the American church has failed to respond in any significant way to the human suffering there. We did a survey that showed eighty percent of American churches had not even taken the time to pray for the refugees, let alone help them. The toxic political rhetoric in our country isn't helping. There is a lot of fear out there, which is understandable after Orlando and San Bernardino, but the truth is, we've been mostly having the wrong conversation about refugees. Bringing fifteen million people to America is not the answer to this crisis. It's far too big to be solved by massive emigration. Ninety-five percent of these refugees will never leave the region, and almost all of the people I have met there, when you ask them what they want, they want to go home, they want to go back to Syria. It's what they've known their entire lives. One of the most moving things I saw was that of these families still carry their house keys with them. For these families, the house keys have become symbols of hope. They dream of the day that they can return, believing against all odds that their house will still be there—that their children's bedrooms will still hold their precious toys and memories, that their kitchens will still be stocked with their dishes and pots and pans, their family photo albums will still be in their closets. Maybe, just maybe, those keys will turn the lock that gives them back their lives. None of us can make that happen for them, that's above our paygrade, but what we can do is help them right where they are. We can provide food, and water, and health care, and education. We can implement programs for their children, we can organize classrooms, we can organize soccer games. We can make sure they live with a little bit of human dignity in the midst of their exodus and exile. We can let them know that someone cares, that they have a friend.

I met a Lebanese pastor on one of these trips I will call Pastor Joseph. Pastor Joseph's church meets on the fourth floor of a building that we would call a tenement in the United States. I walked up crumbling four flights to get to the church. Pastor George and his flock go out into the streets, welcoming refugees and offering them a hand of friendship in Beirut. A hand of friendship to the most unwanted, unwelcome, and unloved people on the planet who have been rejected everywhere they go. He invites them to come to his church on Sundays to pray and worship and to share a meal with his congregation. Today, Pastor Joseph has 350 Muslims coming every Sunday to his church to be taught about Jesus. It's stunning. When we asked Pastor Joseph how can you explain why Muslims come to your church he says it's simple: "The secret is love. We show them Christ's love and they come." But pastors like Joseph are staggering under the load and the burden that they carry, and are asking me why the church in the West has not come to their aid. I believe that God is calling his church into the suffering

of Syria and Iraq—He’s calling his church once again into the world’s emergency room.

Sometimes when I meet these refugee children and I see their bright faces, and eyes, and their smiles, I wonder. I wonder who they are and what God might want them to become. How many of them have the gifts to become future doctors or teachers? Do you wonder that about your children’s choir and those kids filled with potential? What will become of children like Adil and Haya? Is it possible that one of these kids could become a Nelson Mandela, a Mother Theresa, maybe a Martin Luther King for their nation? Maybe one of these children might become the future diplomat who will bring peace to her country, finally bring peace to her country. I wonder. But what they become will depend on how they are treated and whether the world reaches out to them in their hour of need. I do know this—that we as followers of Jesus Christ—we are a ‘sent people’ that God calls each of us into His great rescue mission in the world. He gives each of us the opportunity to be His hands and feet in the brokenness we see around us, and isn’t it a privilege that He invites us to do that in His name? This church, in particular, has been so faithful. I’m so grateful. I wish there were a hundred thousand churches in American like this one, and I want to thank you this morning for embracing that calling, that calling into the world, that calling into the brokenness. Thank you for embracing the responsibility. My prayer for you is that God will continue to bless this church as His ambassadors to a world that is crying out for hope. Thank you.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.