

Remarks by Congressman Les AuCoin
Bethel Congregational Church
Beaverton, Oregon
June 11, 1978

Thought you might be
interested in this.



Good morning to each of you. It's a very real pleasure to share this hour of worship and fellowship with you. I want to thank the congregation and the Reverend Bob Thoma in particular for the invitation to stand at the pulpit today.

This is a new experience for me and I have looked forward to the opportunity.

And you can't imagine how nice it is to be back home in Oregon, too. I think I can safely speak for my whole family -- my wife Sue, my daughter Stacy and my son Kelly -- when I say that returning to Oregon 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 being 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 talk 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 often take for granted in our daily lives -- but which half a billion in this world do without.

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

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 this vexing problem 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.

In terms of my own sensitivity to world hunger, I owe a large debt of gratitude to a popular song-writer and singer who many of you know -- Harry Chapin -- who has become a wonderful friend of mine. It was my great pleasure to meet Harry nearly two 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 -- literally -- onto the main street of Marshall, Oklahoma because the storage bins were already filled to capacity.

Yet the magazine also told another story. A story about drought south of the Sahara and starvation in Bangladesh. Punctuating the grey 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 has stayed with me. It's the kind of thing that 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 a billion human beings are starving.

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 is warped by the great wealth of the advanced nations on the one hand and the extreme poverty of the underdeveloped world on the other.

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.

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

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR reported in 1975 that a mere 20 per cent 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 present you with a challenge in the form of a question: 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 "Less Developed Countries?"

Many Americans believe we already are meeting or exceeding our obligations to the world's needy. A recent survey discovered that although 52 per cent of the American public support the principle of foreign aid, 69 per cent of all Americans think that the United States is more generous in foreign aid than other developed nations.

How does this benevolent self-image square with the facts? The fact is the U.S. ranks 13th out of 17 industrialized nations in giving as a per cent of GNP. At the height of the Marshall Plan in 1948 we actually gave 2.79 per cent of our GNP for development assistance annually; by 1975, that figure had dropped to a mere .24 per cent despite the fact that in the interim our GNP doubled and the human need for assistance was greater than ever. (Either we as a nation are becoming more practiced at the art of self-deception, or we are becoming less sensitive to the needs of others.)

Moreover, in the book entitled TAKING CHARGE, published by the American Friends Committee, it is noted that the U.S. takes billions more in profits and other returns on investment out of Third World countries than foreign aid and direct private investment puts into them. In 1970, this surplus amounted to nearly \$5 billion.

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."

Most of us are familiar with the story of the destruction of Sodom (found in the 16th Chapter of Ezekiel). When asked the reason for God's judgment of the city, most people will point to the city's perversity. But this was actually but one reason. Ezekiel 16:49 states:

"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy."

In the New Testament, we are given the "Great Commission" -- a command 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.

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

What we lack is the personal and political courage to name world hunger a priority problem. What we lack is the commitment, the will to conquer hunger just as we put a man on the moon in the 60's and are committed to finding new sources of energy today.

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. 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 our 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 possibility of extending our energy-intensive farming to the rest of the world is questionable, too. Someone recently noted that if all the world were to eat as the U.S. does, and if their food were produced the way we produce it, all known resources of oil would be completely and totally exhausted in 30 years.

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

And some lessons can be learned in the case of China, which is now food-sufficient after living for thousands of years under the ever-present cloud of famine.

Through labor-intensive techniques, through intercropping, and compost fertilizing, and other means, the Chinese have achieved a reversal of food shortages and starvation. Today China has one third of the world's irrigated land...no shortages of essential foods...it has doubled grain production in 15 years.

One doesn't have to adopt China's political philosophy to benefit from some of the practical wisdom it has employed so successfully in this vital human area.

For America, helping solve the problems of world hunger won't be easy.

It requires us to overcome prejudices about the world's poor, and our role and purpose in helping them.

It requires a new look at our trade policies, including protectionist trade barriers that prevent developing nations from creating jobs for the people and earning much needed foreign exchange. It also means a sustained, predictable U.S. food policy which inspires trust -- not the haphazard, "on-again, off-again" approach of the past.

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 10 million tons per year 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 of 120 to 145 million ton 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.

This demands quite a change in the national policies of many nations. In those policies that favor industry over food. In those policies which make land ownership -- even access to land -- difficult if not impossible for the impoverished masses. In those policies which have prevented credit and farm supplies from being widely available and actively used.

What can we do to start moving down this road? Tentative steps already are being taken.

The President finally has agreed -- at the prodding of Congress -- to establish a national Commission on Domestic and International Hunger and Malnutrition to evaluate and coordinate U.S. food policy.

We can and must establish an International Emergency Grain Reserve. Legislation (HR 10957) to do this will be the subject of hearings on June 13 and 14. As a cosponsor of this bill, I plan to be there to urge early passage of what I believe to be a measure of vital importance. Letters from each of you to Chairman Tom Foley of the Agriculture Committee would help as well, and I urge you to take a moment to share your thoughts with him.

We must also work actively to fill the farmer held grain reserve which was authorized by the Farm Act of 1977. Such a reserve will go a long way toward stabilizing prices and assure developing nations of the continuing availability of U.S. grain in time of need.

We can encourage the development of new food raising techniques such as aquaculture. In 1974 only 5 million tons of fish were raised, yet this represented a fivefold increase from 1970. Just as promising: The Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that fish farming will increase another 500 per cent by 1985. Congress already is doing its part. The House has passed multi-million dollar legislation to create a national aquaculture program and the Senate is actively working on a bill of its own.

We should develop an international food research program in which American scientists can work with scientists from developing countries to raise farm productivity -- in a manner suitable to local conditions -- and identify food crops that are more suitable to conditions in the third world.

Finally, we should funnel new funds into rural development -- to establish the infrastructure which will permit agricultural advancement to take place.

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 and arrogantly refuse to use our vast resources to help the poor and needy, or will we take up the challenge of the Great Commission?

I ask you to think about that this day. And when considering this challenge, you may want to reflect on the following charge we are given in the book of Matthew:

"Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you drink; and when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and 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.'"