A few days ago and less than five miles from here, a crowd of slightly more than 2000 people shouted, jostled and restlessly stood in line to receive what they thought would be an emergency food stamp allocation. The longer they stood, the angrier they became. They had heard about a one-time grant from the Federal Government to assist families adversely affected by the recent flooding in our area. The local news breathlessly and urgently reported that police had to be dispatched to the scene to restore order to an “out of control” situation. I couldn’t help but notice that the vast majority of the people in line for food stamps were black and that the vast majority of the law enforcement personnel were white.

Most of the crowd’s frustration resulted from a misunderstanding – they thought food vouchers were being distributed on-the-spot on that day. Many of them were desperate for assistance. What they received instead of food stamps, though, was a government form to complete – along with a promise that those forms would be processed in due course. Not much help if the cupboards are bare.

The next day, an editorial in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel summarized the economic vulnerability of significant portions of the population in our area. Did you know that Milwaukee is the eighth poorest city in the United States? Were you aware that Milwaukee ranks fourth in the U. S. in the number of children living in poverty? These are grim statistics that rarely make our evening news. Instead, we are treated to daily news stories that depict some of the fruits of those statistics. As one worker for a local food ministry said, “You can't build a freeway around (poverty) and pretend like you don't see it.” Apparently we can try to do just that.

Since last Sunday, another 2 billion dollars has been spent on the continuing conflict in Iraq. I read this week that the estimated total price tag for this war (when it’s finally over) will exceed 1 trillion dollars…that's 1,000 billion! According to one source, the money we spend in about 12 weeks of this war could provide health care to save 8 million poor people. By the end of August, the total amount spent on the war effort in 2008 alone (approximately 80 billion) will have been enough money to provide clean drinking water for all of the poor in the world.

What do the hungry in Milwaukee and the economics of the war in Iraq have to do with Paul’s Letter to the Romans? With Trinity Church? With each of us?

EVERYTHING!

Paul writes in today’s lesson, “Do not let sin exercise dominion over your mortal bodies…” Now, when we hear that language, we probably hear it in terms of individual morality – of how we need to attend to our own behavior. We think in terms of “sins” – those things done and left undone that miss the mark of God’s standard of living. And that’s part of what Paul had in mind, but it’s not the whole story.
As Paul understands it, Sin is a power at work in the world – and Sin’s twin power is Death. Sin is at work in governmental systems, in economic systems, in political systems, in ecclesiastical systems. And Sin’s work is to deliver Death. Death to justice. Death to freedom. Death to peace. Death to human dignity. Death to the life that God wills for all of creation. Death! Death! Death! Such is the work of Sin.

The puny little sins we commit – as painful as the consequences may be for us in terms of lost relationships, lost opportunities and the accrual of the burden of guilt – are merely the side effects of the power of Sin in the world.

Paul is clear. Humankind is enslaved by Sin. We are all under Sin’s domination. But for those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, the yoke of Sin has been destroyed. We are freed from Sin’s power. We are out from under Sin’s reach. And the power that has loosed Sin’s shackles from our lives is God’s grace.

Through God’s unmitigated, unmerited and unrelenting grace, we have been set free from the power of Sin. This is not a grace that merely assuages our guilt. This is not a grace that simply enables us to feel better about ourselves. This is not a grace that only attends to some ethereal part of us we call our “soul”. BY NO MEANS!

This is a grace that pursues us with God’s love. This is a grace that pummels us with God’s mercy. This is a grace that prosecutes us before the bar of God’s judgment and declares us righteous. This is a grace that parts the floodwaters of Sin and opens for us the way that leads to a new way of being – the way of God’s life, the way of eternal life.

Grace breaks the shackles of Sin and secures us in the shackles of God’s righteousness. We are no longer free to do as Sin pleases. We are bound irrevocably to God. Paul exclaims, “But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

In bondage to God, we are engaged in the mission of God in the world. And the mission of God is not merely to rescue people’s souls from some sort of eternal perdition! God’s mission begins now! God’s mission is here! God’s mission is the healing of the world, the wholeness of humanity and the renewal of creation. We all get to join that mission, because we have been conscripted by God’s grace.

In his book, *Everything Must Change*, author Brian McLaren has coined a wonderful phrase, “the incredible shrinking Gospel”. By this phrase, he means the process, over time, whereby the Church has continually narrowed its focus to a preoccupation with the afterlife. This sort of otherworldly emphasis has led churches to primarily become outlets of devotional refueling – places where Christians stock up on enough things “spiritual” so that they can hold on for one more week. In this model, life in the Church has become more and more abstracted from the realities that surround us when we leave here and go out to our everyday lives. This sort of “shrinking Gospel” has led to a privatized faith and a piety that is about getting “our needs met”
— a notion that church is a place where we escape from the world instead of learning how to be leaven within it.

I had dinner with a friend of mine recently who is a rector in another diocese. As we talked about the world in which we live and the ministries to which we have been called, she made a startling statement. She said that a few weeks back, during the middle of a sermon, she had confessed to her congregation her timidity in proclaiming the Good News of God. She told her congregation that in her desire to be inoffensive and to minimize any potential for conflict, she had sold out to the pressure to keep everybody happy.

In this sort of mode, every statement is vetted for its potential social or political impact. Can’t say this, it might offend the Republicans. Can’t say that, it might offend the Democrats. Can’t say this it might offend the high church people. Can’t say that it might offend the low people. Can’t say this it might offend the Hawks. Can’t say that, it might offend the Doves. Can’t say this, it might offend theological conservatives. Can’t say that, it might offend theological liberals. My friend said to me, “After we’ve made sure that we haven’t said anything offensive, we’re left with something so innocuous that there’s nothing left to energize us for mission.” Agreed.

So, fellow followers of Jesus, we who have been shackled by Grace into the service of God’s righteousness – will we engage the mission of God? Will we work for justice, freedom and peace? Will we be instruments of righteousness? Will we proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will we embody the qualities of life that are eternal?

Or…

Will we settle for the incredible shrinking Gospel of personal piety and turn a blind eye to the poor, the friendless and the needy in our own neighborhood? Will we ignore the suffering of millions of children who die for the lack of clean water and fifty cents’ worth of antibiotics? Will we remain silent about the futility and cruelty of war and war’s inability to capture fear and slay insecurity? Will we capitulate to the power of Sin that pays off in Death?

As slaves of God’s Righteousness, do we really have a choice?