My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our expectant Advent hearts, minds, souls and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Above any other resource we have in our world today, the Gospel addresses the relationship issues that keep people shackled in poverty. Bob Pierce understood this as a young man, focusing his passion for God’s kingdom first as an ordained Baptist Minister and then as a missionary to China and Korea in the years between World War II and the Korean conflict. Poverty was endemic, with no functioning economy and even most schools and hospitals burned out beyond repair.

On one trip, he met Tena Hoelkeboer, a missionary teacher, who presented him with a battered and abandoned child. Unable to care for the child herself, Tena asked Pierce, "What are you going to do about her?" Pierce gave the woman his last five dollars and agreed to send the same amount each month to help the woman care for the child.

Poverty has more to do with relationships than resources, power than possessions. When we try to take too much into our own hands, we end up distorting ourselves and the relationships upon which both we and God depend—we talked about this last week—and we can very quickly turn good purpose into oppression, conflict, apathy, isolation, and prejudice, all hardships which cause poverty.

Poverty can occur in three dimensions: relationship with God (spiritual), humanity (social) and environmental (physical). There may be 12 days or Christmas, but there are at least 12 specific shackles bind the poor.

1. Power elites limit their options. People with “god complexes” are everywhere in human activity, from Jeff Bezos to Elon Musk. They owe their status to the contrast between their condition and those at the opposite end of the spectrum.

2. Society’s mainstream views the poor as non-factors—a self fulfilling prophecy, isn’t that convenient? Because non-factors cannot, by definition, cause any trouble or influence change needed to end poverty.

3. The community of the poor isolates themselves from the rest of society. But often it not only fails to act like a community but prevents the poor from seeking community elsewhere.

4. When the traditional networks of caring break down, the poor turn to outsiders. But professional caregivers fail to love those they are hired to serve. True compassion, the heart thing we talk so much about, is lost on the way to good intentions.

5. The poor tend to live in physical isolation from the rest of society. The poor cannot compete economically for choice locations, and the non-poor have no incentive to seek them out and change the game.

6. The poor live in areas vulnerable to natural disasters. Like flood plains of rivers, and barrier islands of hurricane-prone areas. These areas take the longest to recover, and are being squeezed out by politicians who now deem these areas uninhabitable but do not make any provision for relocating the poor.

7. The poor live in increasing dependence on an environment in decline. They’re more dependent on the environment for their livelihood, such as subsistence farmers and fisher persons, and more subject to even small changes in rainfall, soil, and water quality.

8. The poor are fed distorted interpretations of history by those more powerful and in control of information. Often less educated and analytic, the poor allow telling and re-telling of modern poverty myths that govern not only how they but others view their past and future. History-spinners use this to their advantage because the poor have little hope to become history-makers.

9. The poor are rendered physically and emotionally weak by their living conditions. Often living in rental housing most folks would not accept—and living paycheck to paycheck—unemployment, rent affordability and food scarcity are issues that have no safety margin.

10. The poor falsely believe there’s no hope for meaningful change. Hope is more than a feeling or state of mind. It’s an attitude or frame of reference that enormously influences the choices, directions, and destinies of individuals, communities, and nations.

11. The poor develop the habit of equating their identity with their poverty. If that’s who you believe you are, it becomes the only legacy that is left behind for generations that follow.

12. The poor tolerate abuse because they think it may be normative. Powerful folks learn to divide people against one another, and the poor try and keep a distance from the powerful instead of confronting them on this or trying to collaborate for change.

The Good News is that Jesus came to proclaim freedom and health to ALL people. When we understand the Gospel in its full breadth and all its dimensions, we see that God’s proclamations can in fact come true: but it needs to be put into practice by persons who can bring justice for the oppressed, healing for the weak, compassion for the needy, and reconciliation for the alienated.

Too often, however, folks of faith look prescriptively at others, offering either what we know how to do or what we think folks need. The number one thing we can do, as a people of faith, is to listen with an ear to understand rather than an ear to respond. It’s why community organizers get quick action and traction, and why sometimes the mayor’s or governor’s office, with many more monetary and personnel resources, fail with some really well-intentioned efforts.

Especially at this time of year, we can easily fall into that habit of “having done enough” by writing a check to a charity or dropping some toys off at a drop box. God’s proclamations come about best when we are not only iterative partners, participating in those efforts more than just at Christmas, but also witnessing first-hand the problems and having conversations with the folks that we want to help.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Bob Pierce went back to the United States in 1950 and founded WorldVision. It was one of the first NGO’s to sponsor orphans, construct hospitals, provide aid to refugees of wars and disasters, and ultimately became one of the world’s largest Christian relief organizations around. It’s still active in over 100 countries, serving millions of families in need.

Pierce is probably best remembered in clergy circles by having said “let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God”. By having compassion for people everywhere, he let World Vision take on new horizons in 1967 and founded Samritan’s Purse, dedicated to international disaster relief.

God could have chosen any place, time or person to come into the world. God did not choose to appear in human form as a king, a general, a merchant, or anyone who had any privilege. Jesus came to a teenage, unwed mother, turned away by her community and with no one who had compassion to help her in her pregnant state, she gave birth in a stable among others who had no place in society. Jesus is for the poor because Jesus knew poverty, and it’s time we did, too, especially in the season of joyful giving. We should rejoice that Jesus reminds us that our duty is to all who cry out, not our own comfort.

Thanks be to God, Amen.