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The Nobel Lecture

given by  
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2020  
World Food Programme

Delivered by  
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On April 10th, 1815, six thousand miles away from here, on an island in Indonesia, a volcano erupted. It sent a massive plume of ash into the air that eventually encircled the globe. A year later, 1816 became “the year without a summer.” Incessant rains fell here in Norway, Britain, China and the U.S. It snowed 20 inches in July in Boston. Crops failed. Livestock died. People starved. Food riots. Looting. Burning of cities. Floods of refugees. Epidemics of typhus. And it took decades to recover. Millions died in places just like this — the worst famine of the 19th Century.

No one saw it coming. With famine, no one ever does, until it’s too late. I’m here to say: This time we see it coming, as clear as day, and it will affect us all. Unless we act.

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, distinguished members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee and friends around the world, thank you. As you said in your announcement, we do “combat hunger.” We do improve “conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas.” And most of all, we are “a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict.” That’s the World Food Programme: saving lives, changing lives.

Please imagine if you would, that standing with me on this platform are the 20,000 peacemakers of the World Food Programme, who lay down their lives every day for this mission. We remember in our hearts at this moment all those who have died for the mission of making peace with food. On the behalf of all of us, and all of our UN partners, thank you, Norwegian Nobel Committee, for this great honor.

Together we believe food is the pathway to peace.

What is the greatest problem facing humankind? What is our greatest threat to peace?

Working with 115 million people in 80 countries, day-in and day-out, the women and men of WFP have gained a unique perspective. We have learned that there is great richness in those who are seen, in the eyes of the world, as “the poor.” And many of us who are considered “rich” are actually poor in the things that matter most.

Division is the greatest problem. It is known by many names: brokenness; polarization; alienation; discrimination; hatred; and war.

Division's most stark expression right now is the divide between the wealth of billionaires, who earned an additional \$1.8 trillion during this pandemic, and the hundreds of millions of people who go to bed hungry every night.

Allow me to break down the facts of hunger as they stand right now.

811 million people are chronically hungry.

283 million are in hunger crises — they are marching toward starvation.

And within that, 45 million in 43 countries across the globe are in hunger emergencies — in other words, famine is knocking on their door.

Places like Afghanistan. Madagascar. Myanmar. Guatemala. Ethiopia. Sudan. South Sudan. Mozambique. Niger. Syria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Haiti and on and on and on.

The world has often experienced famine. But when has it ever been so widespread, in so many places, at the same time?

Why? Three reasons.

First, man-made conflict. Dozens of civil wars and regional conflicts are raging, and hunger has been weaponized to achieve military and political objectives.

Second, climate shocks /climate change. Floods, droughts, locusts and rapidly changing weather patterns have created severe crop failures around the world.

Third, COVID-19. The viral pandemic has created a secondary hunger pandemic, which is far worse than the first. Shutdowns destroyed livelihoods. Shutdowns stopped the movement of food. Shutdowns inflated prices. The net result is the poor of the world are priced out of survival.

The ripple effect of COVID has been devastating on the global economy. During the pandemic, \$3.7 trillion in incomes — mostly among the poor — have been wiped out, while food prices are spiking. The cost of shipping food, for example, has increased 3 - 400%. But in places of conflict and low-income countries, it is even worse.

For example, in Aleppo, Syria — a war zone, where I just returned from — food is now seven times more expensive than it was 2 years ago.

The combined effect of these three — conflict, climate and COVID — has created an unprecedented perfect storm.

What do we do about it?

The first thing we need to do is restore our moral compass.

The highest standard of humanity has always been the Golden Rule. It is part of all religions and cultures — and it is the foundation of the culture of the World Food Programme every day. I learned it growing up as a child as it was articulated by Jesus of Nazareth: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” or “Love your neighbor as yourself.” I have learned that a more accurate way to translate that from the ancient Hebrew would be: “Love your neighbor as your equal.”

Seeing my neighbor as my equal changes everything.

If I love my neighbor as my equal, racism, sexism and every other divisive “ism” disappears.

And to my way of thinking, we are equals because we are all created in the image of God. Each and every one of us is very special and yet we are equals.

Regardless of your religious views or your views of creation, we can all agree on the practical significance of every single person being equal and most importantly: being treated equally.

It had been a very long day in the rubble of war-stricken Yemen. We were visiting a children’s hospital. In one room, I spotted a pair of little feet, sticking out from under the covers. And I thought about my two daughters when they were little and I said to myself, “I’m going to tickle those little feet.”

I did. But she didn’t giggle, she didn’t smile, she didn’t even move. She just stared with empty eyes. It was like tickling a ghost.

I went out of the room and I wept. Too late. We got there too late.

Our failure to see this little girl as our neighbor, our sister, our equal has created all the consequences of her tragic life: war, starvation and ... those empty eyes.

On her behalf, I must express the urgency of this hour: the global threat of famine for millions and millions of our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, our equals.

You heard this fact from me earlier: 45 million people in 43 countries, knocking on famine's door— and it is within our power to save them.

They are already desperately hungry and are just one weather system, one military maneuver, one price spike or one supply chain blockage away from being plunged into catastrophe.

This is why I have made a one-time, emergency appeal for \$6.6 billion from the billionaires of the world. Is that too much to ask from those who reaped \$1.8 trillion more during the pandemic?

The good news is that we have proven systems in place at the World Food Programme to feed them. Last year we reached 115 million children, women and men and we averted famine.

But the bad news now is with COVID recycling, with devastating ripple effects, we are over \$6 billion short of the funds we need to reach everyone who is knocking on famine's door. We just need the funds to scale up our programs to meet this greater need.

If you won't help your neighbor, your equal, out of the goodness of your heart, then do it out of your national security interest and your financial self-interest.

Case in point. We can support the hungry in Syria with food for less than 50 cents a day. The total support cost of that same person in Germany is around \$70 a day. The five-year cost of supporting one million Syrian refugees in Germany has been \$125 billion.

\$70 dollars a day vs. 50 cents. Which makes better sense?

If we don't avert famine now, there will be destabilization of nations, and mass migration, and it will cost us a thousand times more.

On this platform 42 years ago, Mother Teresa said, "The poor are very wonderful people...The poor are very great people. They can teach us so many beautiful things...The poor give us much more than we give them... They're such strong people, living day to day with no food...We have much to learn from them."

That is why our motivation to help the poor should go much deeper than self-interest. The poor can teach those of us who live in the wealthy world things that we can't learn any other way.

A couple years ago, I was being interviewed for a television program and after we finished, the reporter said, "You've the greatest job in the world, saving the lives of those millions of people."

I said, "I do. I really do. But I'm going to tell you something that you haven't thought of, that is going to bother you. I don't go to bed thinking about the children we saved. I go to bed weeping over the children that we could not save. And, when we don't have enough money and the access we need, we have to decide which children eat and which children do not eat — which children live, and which children die? How would you like that job?"

Please don't ask us to choose who eats and who doesn't eat, who lives who and who dies.

So, let me close with four Golden Rule action steps on how we can love our neighbors.

1. Leaders of the world, in America, in China, in Russia, in India, the Gulf states, the EU, the UK and elsewhere: We need you to assert your power and STOP ALL OF THESE HORRIBLE WARS.

The global cost of violence and conflict is \$15 trillion every year. We could solve every problem on earth with that money.

2. Billionaires of the world, give us the \$6.6 billion we need to prevent famine now and save 45 million lives now.

3. And then, billionaires, give us your creative genius to reinvent food security all over the world. Charity is important, but it will never be enough. You know how to revolutionize phones, cars, rockets, and retail. Help us revolutionize how the planet eats.

And 4. Let's break down all the divisions of the world the old-fashioned way — by sitting down together and breaking bread. If you're black, with a white person. If you're white with a black person, or an Asian or a Latino. If you're rich, with a poor person. If you're a liberal, with a conservative. You get my point.

That's the very best way to learn how to be equals and to realize how special and wonderful and beautiful everybody on this planet is.

In the spirit of Alfred Nobel, as inscribed on this medal

“Peace and Brotherhood.”

For the love of the children of the world— let's feed them all.