



SIFAT

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From
Glimpses of God
...in the Lives of the Poor

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Meet a Statistic

I want to tell you a story. Something I have seen, I've touched, I've lived. I want to tell you the day the statistics of the world came alive to me. It happened in Costa Rica but it could have happened anywhere, perhaps in my own country. Our family moved into a slum area of the capital city and there I began to see human suffering like I had never known before.

Every morning children waited outside our door until we woke up to ask to empty our garbage in the hole in the back of the row of houses where the little garbage they had was dumped. Once I followed them there and found them fighting over a banana peeling.

One morning a little girl knocked at our door and asked to be my maid. She said she was thirteen, but she was so undernourished she didn't look over nine to me. "I will work hard," she tried to convince me. "I'll wash. I'll iron. I'll keep your house clean. I have worked for other people before and they taught me how to cook." She heard my baby cry and added, "And I'll take care of the baby. Please give me the job."

"I do my own work," I responded. "I can't afford a maid." She didn't believe me, and she was right.

"I'll work for three dollars and a half a month," she pleaded. "I'll work seven days a week. I'll do everything."

"Why would you work for so little?" I asked.

"Because my dad died a few months ago and my mother is sick. She has a new baby and she can't work. I've got to find a job or my brothers and sisters are going to die. I think if I worked for you maybe you would give me the scraps off your plates to take home to my family."

I didn't give her a job, but I went with her to meet her mother. I carried my three-months-old baby and my three-year old son toddled along at my side. Their house was about ten feet by twelve feet made of scrap lumber which left cracks in the walls. To keep the wind out, they had plastered the walls with newspapers stuck on with mud. There was no window, only the door and the floor was just the dirt.

In that room were two pieces of furniture--a cot with broken wire webbing without a mattress and an old table with two things on it--a cup with a broken handle and a medicine bottle with a nipple on it. They were trying to keep the baby alive with the water in the bottle because the mother was sick and had no milk for the child.

As I walked into the semi dark hut, I saw the sick mother lying on the cot. By her side was a tiny baby wrapped in rags. The mother slipped over and invited me to sit on the edge of the cot. I tried to get acquainted by showing

interest in her baby. She handed the little girl to me and I took her in one arm. In the other arm I held my own healthy baby. Her baby was half the size of mine.

I wanted to say, "What a cute baby you have!" But there was nothing cute about a baby dying of hunger. I looked into the pinched little face and saw she was too weak even to cry. She just gasped. I wanted to say something, but I felt speechless. Finally I thought of a neutral thing to say. "How old is your baby?"

"Three months old," she answered and I wished I had not asked because I knew she would ask me. She did. "How old is yours?" My lips could hardly form the words. "Three months old," I said.

I could see myself and my child through the eyes of this mother who was powerless to save her child. After a few moments she struggled to her feet and walked over to a dark corner of the room, picked up a naked little boy and set him in my lap.

"This is Carlos, my little crippled boy. He's three years old." I could have said, "She could at least keep him clean." But she had to carry water half a mile and she was sick. Then she had no place to put a child after she had bathed him except the floor which was dirt.

As I took Carlos in my lap, I glanced through the open door just as my three-year-old ran by playing with her older children. She did not know that my son, born the same month as her little Carlos, was born with a crooked foot too. But his foot was straightened by the time he was three months old. As I looked at Carlos' foot, I said to his mother, "That foot can be fixed. I know it can." I did not tell her how I knew.

"I know," she answered. "There is a Crippled Children's Clinic here in San Jose. When my husband was alive he took Carlos to that clinic one day. But it is on the other side of the city. He could not walk there and back in a day. They said he would have to come every week for treatment. How could my husband take a couple of days off every week? He used every waking moment running errands---doing anything that would bring in some food for the children. There just isn't any work. He didn't eat for so long himself that he got sick and died. There was no way he could have taken Carlos every week."

"But there are buses," I responded. "They only cost three cents round trip to anywhere in the city."

"I know," she said. "A bus cost three cents."

Suddenly I understood. Three cents a week was as utterly impossible for her as three million dollars a week was for me. Carlos started to cry. I set him on the dirt floor. He dragged himself with his arms out of the hut.

Later, as I left to go home to try to prepare a balanced dinner for my family, I saw him sitting by the side of the house crying softly to himself, flies swarming over his dirty little body.

They were the same ages as my children. I could have been that mother unable to help my children. Carlos could have been my son; Margarita my daughter dying of hunger. My heart was broken with one of the millions of cases that break the heart of God each day.

I can tell you today that approximately 28 people die every minute in our world for lack of food. I know that approximately 21 of them are children. And yet I cannot imagine 21 children every minute dying. My mind cannot grasp the fact. But I held Margarita in my arms. I knew Carlos personally. The day I met them, I knew I would never be the same again. Suddenly the statistics of the world were not numbers. They were people!

So we took food to them but the next day they were hungry again---and the next. "God!" I called out in my confusion, trying to deal with what I was experiencing, "Why are these people poor? What can we do to change their situation?"

Why Are They Poor?

And then one day God answered my question. We received an invitation to visit a church in the banana zone down near the Panamanian border. We drove on a small dirt road over the high Hill of Death, down its steep sides and on into the banana fields. For miles we drove through a giant plantation of bananas as far as the eye could see. A railroad crossed the little road. Several freight cars were parked on the tracks. Families of the workers were living in the cars. It was easy to move the train throughout the vast plantation to provide workers to the sections that needed them. Children were playing around the track, some of them with protruding little bellies giving evidence of malnutrition.

We saw the fathers working in the banana fields. And after we arrived in the port town of Golfito, we visited a ship being loaded with huge bunches of bananas. In the hold of the ship workers hurried in carrying loads of bananas which often looked bigger than the men who were bent double under their weight.

One man unloaded his bananas on the stack near me. I saw his tired, listless eyes, his ragged clothes, the sweat streaming down the wrinkles of his face. And then I saw a sticker on one of the bananas in the stack he left. In the dim light of the ship's hold, I bent over the bananas and read "Chiquita."

Chiquita bananas are regularly on the shelves of the grocery store in my hometown, population 900, in rural Alabama! But I had never stopped to think how much it cost someone to get them to us. How am I connected to the exhausted man who daily works long hours loading bananas and then does not receive a wage sufficient to feed and house his family?

How often I have eaten the bananas and been glad that I could buy them cheaper than apples and other fruit grown in my country. But that day I suddenly understood why bananas were cheaper than apples.

We often hear people say how much God has blessed us in the United States with so many material advantages. We have more than any country in any time in history has ever had. But that moment I realized that not all the things we call material advantages are blessings from God. Some of them are things we have taken from the poor across the world. I was devastated when I saw the truth.

Why were they starving? Costa Rica has a great climate that could grow food for their own people. But many of the people cannot get access to the land. Why could Margarita's and Carlos' father not find work?

Can we stop to ask why the Central American countries are called the banana republics? Why are they locked in poverty, hunger and violence? Vast lands in Central America are owned by multinational corporations growing cash crops to export to the rich countries of the world, while many Central Americans themselves are hungry and landless.

I arrived too late to save Margarita's life. But I knew God was speaking to me through this family. How could I help them? Give them food--a handout? Yes, I did that, but that was not enough. Tomorrow they would still be hungry. Should I work to change unjust global economic structures that keep people like Carlos' father from a job, from land, from food? Is that too much, too far away, too complicated, too impossible for someone like me? It would be easier to give a piece of bread, a dollar, a thousand dollars and feel I've helped the hungry.

But God will not let me turn back to that more innocent and ignorant time in my life. God gave me a friend whose baby died in my arms --- a statistic of starvation. And then there was that moment in time when I looked into the desperate face of a banana worker and saw his soul and my own tied together in a common destiny. I must answer God's call to try to change unjust situations! Spirit of God! Please show us the way!

"The cries of those who gather in your crops have reached the ears of God, the Lord Almighty." -- James 5:4