

## HUNGRY – FOR JUSTICE

**TEXT:** John 6:1-15

In our reading today, Jesus spoke to a large crowd – about 5000 men, plus women and children. And these folks were hungry. They had been on that hill all day and they were tired. What do you do with a situation like this? We know this story so well. It is recorded in all four of the Gospels. It was a miracle that is known so well that even folks who have never been inside a church can relate the story.

Of course, Jesus was then and has always been known as the guy who feeds the hungry. He understood hunger. In fact, he was undoubtedly just as hungry as everyone in that milling crowd. So when his disciples asked what he planned to do about it, he simply told them to take care of it. His expectation was: there was a need, and his job (and the disciples' job) was to fulfill that need.

But the need was far more than just empty stomachs. Even though that is the essence of the story, the real import of Jesus' activity isn't simply to feed those who are hungry but to reveal something vital about Jesus and, in turn, reveal something vital about God.

But here, in this case, we can see clearly that the food Jesus offers not only satisfies material, physical needs but also spiritual ones. So they want to make him their king. Make no mistake, material needs are important. But this is not what Jesus came to do, and the glory he will reveal is not the glory of another political regime, not even the most effective and benevolent political regime in the world has ever seen. Rather, Jesus came to reveal that God's essential character is loving, and God's essential desire is to be accessible and available to the people of God. It may not be what we want – so convinced are we that material possessions will make us happy – but it is what we need.

So, when evening comes and all these folks are still hanging on, and the disciples are concerned about money – they can only scratch out enough money to perhaps go into

town and buy enough for a mouthful apiece – we meet the little boy with the basket. Unlike the disciples, this boy shares what he has, possibly all he has. He probably knows that it is very little, but he is willing to share what he has. In this way, he serves as a model of faithfulness. If he and his gift, insignificant to the followers of Jesus, can have an impact on feeding the large crowd, then no one can excuse himself from giving and sharing in generosity in an effort to work toward the end of human hunger.

The problem facing Jesus, the disciples and this crowd was hunger.

We still live in a very hungry world. This story is about real hunger, something millions in our world, yes even in our neighborhoods, face each and every day. And hunger is a symptom of something that is more deeply troubling: poverty. When people live in poverty, they cannot provide for themselves or their family members, and this manifests itself in different ways, but particularly in the need for food.

Moreover, we know that hunger leads to sickness, which causes health care costs to rise. Hunger contributes to an inability for children to concentrate in school, thus they fail to learn, which leads to underemployment and unemployment. We could trace poverty and hunger to many of the ills facing our society today. But the question for us is the question Jesus posed to Philip:” How do we feed the hungry?”

This is the question for us as much today as it was on that hillside in Galilee. We need to talk about hunger. It may be that God is allowing physical hunger to ravage our globe in order to awaken God’s church to the worldwide (and local) ravages of spiritual starvation. Our hearts break more quickly when we see a skin-draped skeleton in its mother’s arms than when we hear a missionary say that millions have never heard the gospel and are bound for hell in the wickedness of their worldliness or idolatry. But human hunger and spiritual hunger go hand in hand. Jesus knew that in feeding hungry bodies he was also feeding hungry souls.

Scriptures confront us with words we need to really hear:

Luke 3:11: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food let him do likewise.”

Isaiah 58:10: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters fail not”.

Psalms 41:1: “Blessed is he who considers the poor!”

And the poor are everywhere. One in nine people worldwide do not get enough food. The number of hungry people in the world exceeds the population of the United States. More than 42 million Americans, including 1 in 6 children, lived in households that struggled to put food on the table last year.

In 2016, around one in 8 Washingtonians did not get enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. In the nation, Washington is firmly in the middle of the pack, ranking as the 25<sup>th</sup> hungriest state. The poverty rate for Grays Harbor County is 16.6 percent.

The statistics are daunting, but Jesus challenges us to be his hands and feet for both physical and spiritual hunger. World hunger can be eradicated. A price has been set and estimated by the United Nations to solve this crisis - \$30 billion a year. I struggle to get my arms around a number that size. It may seem like a large sum of money, but when compared to the United States defense budget - \$737 billion in 2012 - \$30 billion seems more attainable.

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First, on a personal level, we can find ways of sharing what we have with others who are in need of food. We can support food banks that provide food for the hungry – most of us know that we have a box just inside our main entrance for this purpose. We can provide fruits and vegetables wherever we see the need. The Friendship House in Aberdeen, which houses homeless women and small children always welcome fresh produce to supplement their meager budget. Donations to our local food banks and Coastal Harvest bring needed support for many of our local citizens.

But yet another way to combat hunger and feed others often escapes us, for we have so reduced Jesus' message of love and justice to a impersonal level. We need to understand that hunger and poverty are caused by political and economic circumstance. People do not choose to be hungry. For most, and especially women and children, hunger is caused by the system in which we live that often favors the more fortunate while neglecting those who are poor. Christians, indeed, all caring human beings, have a moral imperative to proclaim to our lawmakers that God demands justice for the poor.

We must understand our role in changing systems that contribute to the hunger of people and that continue to entrap people in poverty. We must stand against economic policies that cut programs that help the poor, and we must push for programs that lift the poor out of their plight to find not only nourishment, but human dignity.

While providing nourishment for the body, Jesus gives us nourishment for the soul. He explains the mystery of salvation in this tableau of an impromptu picnic. The Messiah, God and Man, has come among us. His bounty is bottomless. He offers eternal life, there for our taking. He asks only that we come as we are, bringing what we have. What we give to him will be blessed and miraculously multiplied on a cosmic scale. By his grace we will be satisfied beyond imagining.

But make no mistake, Jesus does not feed us abundantly so we can become spiritually self-absorbed...basking in his favor...indolent in his service. We are meant to put all this ingestion of energy to work. In faith, we must go do work, facing challenges,

enduring disappointments, forgiving betrayals. But beyond that, we must be Christ's hands in the world, working to build the kingdom, witnessing his love in all that we do.

In this Gospel passage, as in all others, there is a single unifying message: God loves us. And Christ is the literal embodiment of that love. Where we see scraps, he creates abundance. Where we see emptiness and depression, he creates profound fulfillment, and boundless joy. In his love we are nourished and protected. He is the bread of life, infinitely enriched and multiplied for our salvation. So, today, come to his feast, and never walk away hungry. Live in his love, and the feast never ends. Amen

