

“Sermon Feeding the Hungry”

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We are now a nation of 320 million people; 49 million, 16 million children, lack the means to have nutritious meals on regular basis, in a country that listed 540 billionaires in 2016. This is one in six or 15% of all individuals in this country who face hunger. To supplement our great poverty, we have created a nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs that provides food and services to people each year. These hunger relief programs exist in every one of our states. Food banks are those organizations that gather donated food from national and grocery manufactures, producers and growers and government agencies and then supply the food pantries and the meal programs that directly work with people in need. Last year these networks supplied more than 4 billion meals to Americans in need. Large food bank organizations not only support programs who help national food security, but educate on problems of hunger and the advocate for legislation that affects the hunger. Volunteers involved in feeding the hungry in this country number in the millions. Most food banks and soup kitchens in this country are supported by religious organizations, but nationally we have programs WIC or food stamps that are supported by tax dollars. We nationally identify schools in low income areas as title I and the Department of Agriculture under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 ensures that children have access to the nutrition they need to grow into healthy adults. If the school is found eligible; the participating schools are able to offer free breakfast and lunches to all

students without having to require parents to Proof of eligibility so as not to stigmatize the children for their poverty. As a result, during the school year, 2014-2015, about 14,000 schools in over 2,000 local educational districts serving more than 6.4 million children elected to participate in the program for its ability to both reduce administrative burden and increase access to school meals for children in low income communities.

Our congregation participates in five programs which affect the hungry. Everyone involved is a volunteer. Every other Monday we sponsor a food bank truck, and a community breakfast at the Fern Street kitchen. Weekly we prepare sandwiches for a shelter and participate in a backpack program which helps hungry children by providing them with nutritious, and child friendly food to take home for the weekends when resources may not be available. We just initiated a food pantry which supplies food for about 30 families every other week.

Worldwide since 1990 hunger and extreme poverty has decreased, but 40% of the world's population still live in extreme poverty. There are two opposing welfare theories that deal with poverty. At their extremes, the poor are assumed to be poor because they do not wish to work, and on the other side it is assumed that our economic system contributes to poverty. In reality we are probably somewhere between the extremes and both parties have policies that reflect their believe structure on how they view humankind and motivation. My personal belief is that people enjoy the satisfaction and rewards of work and so therefore the problem lies primarily in an unequal and imperfect economic system.

The story the feeding of the 5000 that you heard read is the metaphor. It is retold as the story of stone soup which we all contribute and I believe it is part of our humanity that we reach out to feed each other. Another ancient story going back 3000 years from a Chinese tradition which tells of the Monk instructing a student who asked the questioned “what was Heaven and what was hell.” He says first I’ll tell you what is hell. You’re in a large banquet hall and the tables are loaded with everything scrumptious to eat. But the food is placed towards the centers of the table and the people are given 3 foot chopsticks so they each piece of food they pick up and try to put in their mouth drops off because the sticks are too long and they can’t get them to their mouths, and everybody is hungry. The student asks “what is the definition of heaven.” The monk tells them they’re in a large banquet hall and the tables are loaded with everything scrumptious to eat, but the food is placed want to center the table and the people are given three-foot chopsticks, and everyone is well fed because they’re feeding each other. What a metaphor for our economy, but all three of these stories are parables about what it is to be human. Feeding each other, feeding the hungry, is an act that makes us more human. Liked the book of Mark tells us that Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.”

The story that Meg Barnhouse tells is a story that is repeated throughout our human history whenever there is a natural disaster. We are drawn to community and we eat in the community, and it links us together and the few times in our modernity when we can truly say we need each other. I believe the times of stress likes icestorms,

snowstorms, or hurricanes, or floods are not only times when communal feeding is the most efficient, but it gives us a natural excuse to be in community when we really need to be in the community. Meg's congregation's decision to ritualize their response to the power outage is really reenacting a communion. While the act of Christian communion may be thought as an act of connecting Christians to each other, I feel it has deeper human roots that reach into our primordial human experience. We as a species have gathered around food sources and shared those resources as an act of humanity.

The Fern Street kitchen is part of that humanity. The people that I see both preparing and serving, and those people that arrive every other week to participate in the breakfast are both there as acts of community. It is as much for community as for sustenance. In fact, it may be more about community than about hunger.

I suspect over the next few years the public trough that supports programs for those at bottom of our economic pyramid will become thinner and our tasks as religious organizations will grow.

Now we've considered the food ministries as social actions because of this charitable acts we do for people in many cases are what we expect society to do for people. Much of our support for refugee family, when they were with us, was social actions. But there was a part of the whole issue of refugees that is social justice. This is advocating for refugees into the country as part of our responsibility as a democracy we would like to think ourselves part. That is to say, sponsoring and welcoming refugees is an act of justice,

universal human justice, as reflected in our principle of the individual worth the dignity of every human being. I feel that part of our feeding the hungry is and will be more importantly seeking justice especially in our American system that seems to favor those at the very top at the expense of those at the very bottom economically.

This morning we celebrate this congregation's dedication to feeding the hungry and especially those who dedicate themselves to our various programs of feeding the hungry. May we also dedicate ourselves working for a justice where having sufficient nutrition will be a human right. In an ever-evolving and never-ending world amen