

They Were Hungry

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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March 20, 2022

Texts

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 58:1-8

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

Luke 9:10-17

10 On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. ¹¹When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

12 The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.' ¹³But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.' ¹⁴For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, 'Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' ¹⁵They did so and made them all sit down. ¹⁶And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. ¹⁷And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

Sermon

They were hungry, and he fed them. It's pretty simple, really. The day was ending, and the people were hungry, and Jesus fed them.

They are hungry, and they feed them. It's pretty simple, really. People fleeing a war zone wound up there, hungry, and they fed them.¹ I am sure that there are many folks cooking for Ukrainian refugees right now, but one of them is World Central Kitchen, making loaves and fishes multiply.

They are hungry, and we feed them. It's pretty simple, really. Church folks, right now, making sandwiches and lunch bags. Homeless and food insecure folks, selecting turkey or pb & j, pretzels or granola bars. And as the sandwich moves from hand to hand, there is a sharing of kindness and gratitude and dignity.

He was hungry, and they fed him. Martha and Mary. Simon's mother-in-law. The Gospels say that these folks fed Jesus. But, it's pretty simple, really. We're all feeding

¹ World Central Kitchen, <https://wck.org/>

Jesus. Jesus says, whenever someone is hungry and you feed them, you are feeding me.

In the Bible, as near as I can tell, there are no miracles that celebrate scarcity. There are no miracles of shrinkage, only miracles of abundance. Miracles make ways where there are no ways, make food when there is not enough, bring health where there is sickness, draw water from dry ground. These are miracles that proclaim, there is enough for everyone.

Think all the way back to the Exodus, as we did last week. God brought forth water from a rock so no one would be thirsty. And God sent manna, so the people would not starve. But there's an interesting twist in the Exodus story. Everyone has enough, but no one has too much.

Bible professor Patricia Tull says this about manna:

“Though a generous gift from God, the manna comes with some clear principles. First, everyone has enough. Since no one has more than another, circumstances enforce equality. Second, manna spoils after one day, so they are no more able to hoard it than they can the air they breathe. For people who had spent their lives building storage cities for hoarding, food that cannot be used for economic exploitation is new.”²

There is enough for all. This is one of the new frameworks of living that God teaches the people in 40 years of wilderness. It takes a long time to build new habits. And when they get to this new promised land, God has more sacred food practices - the land is sacred, food is sacred, workers are treated fairly, and getting to eat is a right.³

Hundreds of years later, the prophet Isaiah speaks again of food, asking what fast God wants. God does not want sackcloth and ashes - God wants a fast that builds freedom, a fast that builds hope, a fast that means everyone will have enough.

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² *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible and the Ecological Crisis*, p. 78

³ *Ibid*, p. 80

There is enough for all. They are hungry - so feed people.

¹⁶And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. ¹⁷And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.”

Jesus looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the bread, and shares it.

Jesus prays nearly the same way, to feed 5,000 folks, *and* to share his ongoing presence with his followers. I think we’re supposed to link the last supper to this hillside moment. To feed the hungry is to engage in sacred Communion with Jesus. We “create community around the table through shared meals.”⁴

Now what does this have to do with creation care, climate justice, and the renewal of the earth?

Let me make my point plainly: often the same practices that harm the earth and lead to climate change also cause people to go hungry. Practices that keep people hungry damage the planet. On the other hand - in some beautiful cases, practices that feed the hungry are also practices that protect creation.

To quote Michael Pollan, “Eating is an agricultural act.... It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world-and what is to become of it.”

Monoculture industrial farming practices that rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticides are a problematic example. It’s so easy to grab stuff from the grocery shelves, red bell peppers twelve months out of the year. (I confess that I bought some on Friday.) But often these operations harm the land - eroding topsoil and polluting waterways - and limit possibilities for small farmers.⁵ And when food production is centralized, tremendous amounts of fossil fuels are used to get food to grocery store shelves.

So, one strategy for change is to support local, organic farming whenever possible. Doing so nourishes the soil and reduces the carbon footprint of food production, which is hugely important in our work to deal with climate change.⁶

⁴ Brooks Berndt, Cathedral on Fire

⁵ Craig Goodwin, Year of Plenty:

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<https://theconversation.com/food-production-generates-more-than-a-third-of-manmade-greenhouse-gas-emissions-a-new-framework-tells-us-how-much-comes-from-crops-countries-and-regions-167623#:~:text=>

But let's also talk about food waste, and about feeding hungry folks. This is something I think we can all address, regardless of income, and even here in late winter New England. Food waste contributes enormously to climate change.⁷ I'm quoting the USDA here: "Reducing and preventing food waste can increase food security, foster productivity and economic efficiency, promote resource and energy conservation, and address climate change, which in turn, could also decrease climate change-related shocks to the supply chain."⁸ By some estimates a third of food in the US is wasted, and food waste globally represents 8 percent of global carbon emissions.⁹ Some of that is taking too much on our plates, some is grocery stores throwing out edible food, some of that is just stuff wallowing in our crispers.

So, we've got monoculture industrial farms that damage our planet's ability to keep providing good food, and we're wasting a lot of the food that we do have.

And we've got folks going hungry.

Yet it doesn't have to be this way.

There are groups right in this area that are aimed right at this intersection. One of them is FoodLink, that Lexington's MLK Day supported this year. This is what they are about:

"Food Link is a community organization that rescues fresh food, alleviates hunger, and contributes to environmental sustainability. Food Link's vision is a food system without waste, in which everyone has enough." Zac and I had the chance to serve there on MLK Day and we saw first hand how good food that stores could no longer sell is making it to hungry people. I know there are other folks in this congregation who work with Food Link.

They were hungry, and they were fed. Share your food with the hungry and your light shall break forth like the dawn. It's pretty simple.

Every week in Lent we're talking about a creation care and climate justice challenge, and a piece of good news.

[Greenhouse%20gases%20from%20food%20production&text=Overall%2C%20we%20calculated%20that%20the.teragrams\)%20of%20carbon%20dioxide%20yearly](https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2022/01/24/food-waste-and-its-links-greenhouse-gases-and-climate-change#:~:text=EPA%20estimated%20that%20each%20year.42%20coal%2Dfired%20power%20plants)

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<https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2022/01/24/food-waste-and-its-links-greenhouse-gases-and-climate-change#:~:text=EPA%20estimated%20that%20each%20year.42%20coal%2Dfired%20power%20plants>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2021/02/25/climate-curious-food-waste/>

You have guessed that the challenge I suggest for this week of Lent is to not waste any food. Or to try your best. Compost your scraps, donate the chips you don't like, eat your way through your fridge. I know, it's harder than it sounds, and I confess that am terrible at this. But you have already heard the good news - that there are groups doing good work to reduce food waste and to feed people. Let's join them, and be part of a miracle of abundance, where all people eat well and God's creation is cared for.

Let me close with Wendell Berry:

"I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves *the world*. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God."

Amen.