

# Speaking of Hunger...

Volume 2



More Sermons of Challenge & Hope  
from Seeds of Hope Publishers and the H. C. Gemmer Family Christian Foundation



# Speaking of Hunger, Vol. 2

## More Sermons of Challenge & Hope

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### Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. Since 1991, the group has sought out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable and empower

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Sacred Seasons logo by Sharon Rollins, Seeds of Hope logo by Erin Kennedy Mayer

a variety of responses to the problems of hunger and poverty.

### Editorial Address

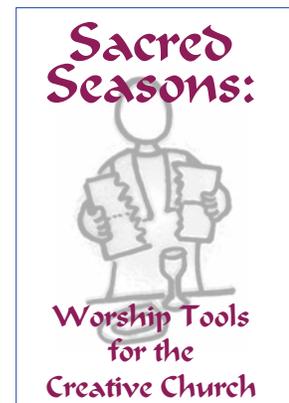
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# A Word about This Resource

Ten years ago, the people at Seeds were working closely with an ad hoc group of people who called themselves the Interfaith Hunger Educators. They represented the anti-hunger programs of the Presbyterian Church USA, two Lutheran denominations, two Reformed denominations, United Methodists and several Baptist groups, among others—including some truly interfaith representatives. The group met yearly to share resources and brainstorm about creative ways to make their congregations aware of hunger issues.

This is the group that, in 2001, founded and originally sponsored *Hunger News & Hope*, one of the major Seeds publications. In 2008, the members suggested a need for a cache of sermons that were specifically about hunger. Since one of our major projects is *Sacred Seasons*, a series of worship resources with an emphasis on hunger and poverty issues, we decided to respond with a collection of sermons called *Speaking of Hunger: Sermons of Challenge & Hope*.

Two years ago, Seeds sought and received a grant from the H. C. Gemmer Family Christian Foundation to produce another such collection. It has taken us this two years to produce *Speaking of Hunger, Volume 2* for a number

of reasons. We wanted to make our list of writers more diverse. We wanted to include sermons that have never been published, as well as sermons gleaned from the past 10 years of *Sacred Seasons* Hunger Emphasis packets. We wanted this collection to be *really good*.

And we think it is. The materials here were freely and lovingly contributed by ministers, writers, and artists who believe strongly in our quest to help congregations as they incorporate hunger and justice issues into their worship times. We hope you are inspired, challenged, disturbed and encouraged by them.

This collection is a gift to your congregation from Seeds, from our writers and artists, and from the H. C. Gemmer Family Christian Foundation. We hope you will make use of these materials in your worship and work. We hope you will feel free to play around with them and adapt them to your congregation's needs and resources. We hope you will share them with others. We want these good words to go far and wide, to work toward that day when all of God's children will have enough to eat.

—Gratefully,  
Katie Cook, on behalf of the Seeds staff  
and Council of Stewards



art by Jesse Manning

# A Few Thoughts about Preaching on Hunger

by Katie Cook

I think it is possible to grow up in a church without hearing a sermon about hunger issues or the biblical mandates to take care of vulnerable people. I hope that has changed since my youth, but I'm afraid that the change has been small. Especially today, especially in the politically and economically polarized world we inhabit, I think we need more sermons about hunger.

Eight years ago, in response to a request from several Christian denominational leaders, the Seeds staff compiled a collection of hunger sermons called "Speaking

to look away. Our job is to get them to look, and truly see, without feeling paralyzed. We sometimes have to shake people up, but then we want to get them to respond in a sustained way.

Many people see the Bible as the authority for their lives. This will NOT be a problem. There are hundreds of biblical injunctions about feeding poor and hungry people. (Dan Bagby has given us an abridged list on pages 7-8.) As founding Seeds editor Gary Gunderson once wrote, "There is no need for fancy interpretation

on this issue. Let the Bible speak for itself. *But do let it speak.*"

Once the congregants are convinced that the Bible does, indeed, tell us that we are to care for others in need, we need to be honest with them. They need to know that the problems around hunger are complex and sometimes confusing.

Food insecurity is connected with almost every major world problem: environmental degradation, armed conflict, military spending, the gross imbalance of consumption, energy use, the impending global shortage of water, lack of education, corporate greed, abuse of power, devaluation of women, racial injustice—the list goes on and on.

Christians need to understand that the answers are not obvious or simple. We are being called by God

to tackle a very complicated problem.

We also want to avoid making people feel like they have to feed the whole world by themselves. We need to give them a few ideas of what they can do. We may not know all the answers, but we certainly know enough to get started. Almost any facet of the problem has at least a small group of dedicated people hard at work—using innovative, creative methods.

Your congregants need to know that much is already happening with which they can help. Most Christians, when they hear that people are going hungry, want to make things better for them. We're here to help them find their best way to do that.

—Katie Cook is the editor for *Seeds of Hope*.

art by Peter Yindji Clark



*"There is no need for fancy interpretation on this issue. Let the Bible speak for itself. But do let it speak."*

of Hunger: Sermons of Challenge & Hope." We took our favorites from the annual *Sacred Seasons* Hunger Emphasis packets, and we added some material from people who taught preaching classes. We've done that again. We hope you'll find hermeneutical resources that you can use in these pages.

Before you start reading the sermons, however, we have a few thoughts for you. We have been thinking about how to present hunger issues to Christian congregations for a long time. We try to provide resources that will help you keep the issues foremost in their minds, gently but persistently. Below are a few things we have noticed.

People tend to get defensive at the very idea of a hunger sermon. It makes them feel guilty, so they want

# Calorie-Counting Ministers in a Starving World

by Brett Younger

Text: Amos 5:14-24

In the early 1900s, China became a republic with a president. The emperor still had hundreds of ladies-in-waiting, cooks and guards, but he was only a figurehead with no real power. When the last emperor, Pu Yi, realized this he said, "The Forbidden City has become a theater without an audience, so why do the actors remain on stage? It is only to steal the scenery piece by piece."<sup>1</sup>

*Our theology has been shaped by the economic preferences of a materialistic society rather than by Jesus.*

Ministers are tempted to spend our lives stealing the scenery, rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*, fiddling while Rome burns and handing out aspirins while the world explodes.

Our vision for ministry is too small. We fall for the lies that what matters is the offering plate, that the website looks good, that we attract young families—and that the band sounds professional and the sermon peppy.

Our vision for ministry is too small. We think the purpose of worship is to keep people satisfied, so we sing the same songs, pray the same prayers and preach the same trivialities.

Our vision for ministry is too small. Our self-esteem is dependent on whether we can increase the crowd for the youth's movie night from eight to 12, knowing that we can do it if we just get a bigger flat screen and pretend we do not know *Sausage Party* is rated R.

We worry that we are going to hurt someone's feelings. We worry about the mother who thinks her second grader is so smart she needs to be in the third grade Sunday-school class. We worry about the senior-adult women who say they had 300 for Vacation Bible School back when they were in charge and why don't we have that many now? We worry that a blog on why *The Big Bang Theory* was never cool would be too controversial.

We debate the church's wedding policies and wonder if we can take the flag out of the fellowship hall during the reception. We campaign for 10 more "likes" on the church Facebook page and hope the cooks don't see the joke about Wednesday night's chicken spaghetti. We stay busy trying to look like good ministers.

Our ministries end up being too much like Jimmy Fallon, not enough like Jon Stewart; too much Meghan Trainor, not enough Bruce Springsteen; too much suit and tie, not enough spiked orange hair; too much capitalism, not enough social justice; too much country club, not enough Black Lives Matter. We are tempted to spend our ministries caretaking, rearranging, fiddling, keeping things going, and acting like the competition is the Presbyterian church down the street.

Our vision for ministry is too small for a world where people are hungry. How can we be satisfied with maintaining an institution when children starve? How can we spend our time on the trivial when mothers have nothing to eat?

The house next door is on fire and we are trimming the hedges. The car is about to fly over the cliff and we



are changing the radio station. Children have nothing to eat and we are trying to look like good ministers.

The average American eats four times as much as the average citizen of the world. Some 870 million—12.5 percent of the world's population is undernourished.<sup>2</sup> Some of us count calories while others go hungry.

We are studying the menu while children starve; picking our favorite drink at Starbucks while mothers lose their five-year-olds; looking for the best barbecue place while five-year-olds lose their mothers; complaining

*The church does not need any more reasonable ministers. We need ministers who will set their own hair on fire for what is right.*

about the choices at the cafeteria while fathers choose between eating enough to keep working and feeding their daughters; working through the microwave Lean Cuisines trying to find the ones that taste like food while women walk two miles for clean water every day; arguing the merits of Moe's versus Chipotle while two-year-olds suffer brain damage from a lack of protein; saving room for dessert while God's children struggle to survive.

Some 21,000 people will starve today from hunger-related diseases, most of them are children, one person every four seconds, but it is not news.<sup>3</sup>

We know how horribly painful it is when young Americans die tragic deaths in a school shooting. Why don't we cry for hungry children? What could be more violent than starvation?

The early church believed for a time that affluence is a sin against those who are starving. They soon discovered that preaching that message tended to keep wealthy people from joining, so the church does not consider wealth a sin any more. Our theology has been shaped by the economic preferences of a materialistic society rather than by Jesus.

We do not want to admit that what we have has anything to do with what others do not have. We do not want to feel guilty for an expensive car or two televisions or five different kinds of cereal in the pantry. We want to keep buying things that we do not need. We do not want to imagine how we would explain to a hungry child why we do not share more of what we have. Our vision for ministry is too small to include needy children.

The prophet is angry at religious folks who do not care about starving people. The sanctuary is crowded. The balcony is full. Giving is over-budget. They have more programs than ever, but Amos knows something is terribly wrong.

The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The wealthy have summer homes by the lake. They eat and drink too much. They live off capital gains while the poor do not have enough to survive.

Amos sees the growing gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." He sees the wealthy at Ruth's Chris Steak House enjoying prime rib and sipping red wine. This one meal could feed a poor child for a month. Amos sees a weary mother waking her listless nine-year-old, walking her to a dilapidated school, and knowing her daughter will soon have to join her in the fields—and no amount of hard work will make it enough.

God tells Amos:

*Go shout it in the streets. Cry. Scream. Yell. Tell them God is coming and there's going to be hell to pay for the members of the finance committee who think they're going to get applause for protecting the church endowment. It's going to be ugly for those who think justice is keeping what they have safe from the people who need it most, ugly like being mauled by a bear, ugly like torture, ugly like a bright sunny day that turns into Hurricane Sandy.*

*Amos, don't make it sound any softer than this; tell them, 'I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up to here with your conferences, conventions and committees. I want nothing to do with your projects and plans, your fund-raising schemes and your public relations. I'm sick of your youth selling chicken sandwiches to raise money to go to Disneyworld. I'm tired of religious people giving their attention to tiny concerns, caught up in tiny ministries, and working only to keep their tiny programs going.*

*Listen to me. You have two people living in a house with four bathrooms. Your car cost \$40,000. You go to Europe to see sights you've already seen. How could you possibly defend that to children who are dying?'*

No one asks the preacher to lunch after Amos finishes.

The prophet has a vision that includes justice for God's children. The Hebrew people could turn and seek good. God will be gracious to them if they start loving the hurting people outside the sanctuary. God will accept their offerings if they are giving to feed God's children. God will hear their songs if it is the music of compassion. God will help them find their way to goodness—oceans of it, fairness—streams of it, justice—rivers of it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. caught Amos' vision of justice rolling down like waters:

*One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand. Children from India will ask: What is hunger? Children from Alabama will ask: What is racial segregation? Children at school will ask: What is war? You will answer them. You will tell them: Those words are not used any more, like stagecoaches, galleys or slavery. Words no longer meaningful. That is why they have dictionaries.<sup>4</sup>*

Amos dreams of righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. God will give us a bigger vision of ministry, a vision of justice.

Some young people went to seminary because they wanted the tools to become more efficient, effective and successful ministers. They should have been told the truth. Seminaries should put it on the website and announce it at the preview conference: "The church has enough ministers who want to be efficient, effective and successful. We need passion, anger and desire."

The church does not need any more ministers who want to maintain the church. We need ministers who will poke and prod the church.

The church does not need any more reasonable ministers. We need ministers who will set their own hair on fire for what is right.

*The church can be an electric gathering if we believe that what we do makes a difference, love makes a difference, hope can be reawakened, evil can be overcome by living like Christ and sharing what we have.*

The church has more than enough predictable, conventional, cookie-cutter ministers. We need ardent, zealous, fervent, fiery, incensed, inflamed, enraged, obsessive, impassioned, hot-blooded and fanatical ministers.

The church does not need any more temple administrators, Pharisees, or Sadducees. We need Amos, John the Baptist, St. Francis, Martin Luther, Lottie Moon, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Tony Campolo and Desmond Tutu.

The followers of Jesus that the church needs are the mad ones, mad to be saved, mad to save others, mad to save lives, mad to save the world,<sup>5</sup> the ones who are never bored with the church because they are always pushing, provoking, pointing out that we can be more.

God needs outliers, nonconformists, mavericks, eccentrics, dissidents, and dissenters. The church has enough people keeping rules. We need exceptions to the rules.

On Sunday mornings, our sanctuaries start the day as empty boxes. The minister's job is to be an instrument by which God fills the sanctuary with fury, joy and revolution.

The church can be an electric gathering if we believe that what we do makes a difference, love makes a difference, hope can be reawakened, evil can be overcome by living like Christ and sharing what we have.

We can want what God wants. We can worry about what God worries about. We can weep over what God weeps over. We can push for what God pushes for.

Rather than be satisfied with small ministries that support an institution, we can do something amazing. We

can feed God's children. We can lead churches to feed the hungry. We can tell search committees, "I would love to be your minister. If I come, then we need to take up offerings for hungry people. We need to advocate for the poor. We need to share what we have with God's children."

We can live simply. We can go without status symbols and luxuries, so that we can give to feed the hungry. We can live a trimmed-down life. We can choose not to have more new, better things. We can show our churches what it means to be loving, joyful and Christlike.

Our ministries can be big enough to include the people who most need our help. We can make a life-saving difference. Because of what we give, a mother who might have lost her five-year-old will get to wake her up each morning, a five-year-old who might have lost her mother will get hugged each night, a farmer will have enough tools to provide, a woman will walk 50 feet to a new well for clean water.

We can do something really big. We can save the lives of children. We can give money away. We could save a life or two or more.

We can share with those who live in remote communities with little or no access to clean water or electricity. Our gifts can address hunger among children through education, agriculture and microenterprise. We can protect wells from contamination, provide mosquito nets for young mothers, fund educational systems for orphans and offer improved seeds to farmers.

In the church, we often disagree about exactly what it means to follow Christ. Sometimes it is hard to tell what God wants in regards to particular issues. The relationship between our money and starving children is not one of those issues. We can be certain what God wants us to do. Nothing could be clearer than that God is calling us to feed God's children.

We can go beyond the routine and be the ministers God calls us to be. We can give more than most would expect, and let justice roll like waters.

—Brett Younger is the Senior Minister at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY, and a longtime and frequent contributor to Seeds Magazine, Hunger News & Hope and Sacred Seasons.

## Endnotes

1. Vittorio Storaro, *The Last Emperor*, DVD, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Recorded Picture Company, 1987.
2. James Addis, "The 10 Worst Places for Hunger," *World Vision*, online: [www.worldvision.org/news/10-worst-places-hunger](http://www.worldvision.org/news/10-worst-places-hunger) (accessed 31 Jan 2013).
3. "Hunger and World Poverty," online: [www.poverty.com](http://www.poverty.com) (accessed 14 Aug 2016).
4. Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in Kathleen A. Guy, *Welcome the Child: A Child Advocacy Guide for Churches*, (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1991), 113.
5. Jack Kerouac might have put it this way if he had written a commentary on Amos.

# What God Wants Us to Do about Hunger: A Look at Food Security & the Bible

by Daniel G. Bagby

## God Wants All People to Have Enough Food.

- God made us in the image of God, and asks us to be stewards (caretakers) of all creation. (Genesis 1: 26-30)
- As stewards made in God's image, we are also accountable for the care of another, as God cares for us. (Genesis 4:9)
- God expects those created in God's image to share

*As believers, we are to call congregations, communities, and government entities to respond to the needs of God's children everywhere—including the need for food.*

a communal care for one another, and to love our neighbour. (Leviticus 19:9-10, 17-18; Luke 10:28-37)

- Leaders and other people in positions of power have been commissioned by God to care for the needs of all. (2 Samuel 5:2, Chronicles 11:2)
- God has promised the people of God that their needs shall not be forgotten, and that they shall be fed—and that what the Creator wants from followers is not gifts to God—but actions of care toward God's children (Isaiah 40:10-11, Isaiah 49:9-10, Isaiah 58:5-7)
- The Maker also wants the people of God to know that God is aware of greed, hoarding, and self-absorption, and that people in charge of caring for God's children will be judged on their stewardship of resources—and that God requires rightness—"just care." (Jeremiah 23:1-4, Ezekiel 34—read the entire chapter!)
- Christ himself was aware of and responsive to the hunger of people, not only feeding them, but asking his disciples to do so also. (Matthew 15:30-38, Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, John 6:5-13)

- In the gospels, the final evaluation of whether followers are genuine disciples of Christ—is based on the evidence of their response to human need—beginning with hunger. (Matthew 25:31-45)
- God cares so much for all people that we are even enjoined to feed our enemies when they are hungry. (Romans 12:20-21)
- A disciple in a letter to young churches affirms that any believer who has resources and fails to share them with a brother or sister in need must certainly not "abide" in God's love. (1 John 3:17)
- The full will of God will one day be expressed in an eternal order where neither hunger nor tears will exist. (Matthew 6:10-11, Revelation 7:16)

## We as Christians Have a Responsibility.

- To fail to share with our hungry sister is to fail to understand our identity as a family member in God's wider family.
- The people of God have a communal responsibility to work together to care for the most vulnerable and neglected people of God.
- Those who follow the will of God and have a voice and resources are called to speak for and represent those who have no voice, both teaching all God's children about communal responsibility, and offering them avenues of care response.
- Though the reign of God will one day restore plenty to all—as God designed creation—we live in a "fallible in-between" where we are called to distribute God's bounty—to all of God's children—as human agents of God's care and compassion.
- As believers, we are to call congregations, communities, and government entities to respond to the needs of God's children everywhere—including the need for food.

## Biblical References to Hunger & Food Security

- Genesis 1:26-30: "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after God's likeness, and let them

have dominion...and over all the earth...And God said, behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed....and tree...for food...."

- Genesis 4:9: "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'"
- Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap the field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after the harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare,

*To fail to share with our hungry sister is to fail to understand our identity as a family member in God's wider family.*

neither shall you gather the fallen grapes...; you shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner...."

- Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...."
- 2 Samuel 5:2b/1Chronicles 11:2b: "...And the Lord said to thee, Thou shall feed my people Israel, and thou shall be a captain over Israel."
- Isaiah 40:11: "God will feed God's flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom...."
- Isaiah 49:8-9: "I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people....They shall feed along the ways, and all bare heights shall be their pasture."
- Isaiah 58:6-7: "Is not this the fast that I choose...Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...?"
- Jeremiah 23:2-4: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people.... I will set up shepherds over them that shall feed them...."
- Ezekiel 34:2-3, 8, 13, 29: "Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? Ye eat the fat...but ye feed not the flock....the shepherds fed themselves, but not the flock.... I will bring them (my people) out and feed them upon the mountains.... And I shall provide for them prosperous plantations so that they will no more be consumed with hunger in the land...."
- Matthew 16:32, Mark 6:32: "...and he (Jesus) had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd... 'You give them something to eat' (to his disciples).
- Matthew 25:34: "Then the King will say to those at his right side, 'Come, O

blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food...."

- Luke 10:33-35: "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him.... The next day he took out two coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying: 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"
- Romans 12:20: "No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink...."
- 1 John 3:17: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"
- Revelation 7:15-16: "...and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence, They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more...."

*—Dan Bagby recently retired as the Theodore F. Adams Professor of Pastoral Care at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in Virginia. He has written a number of books about pastoral care. He was a pastor for 26 years, served in pastoral care centers and as chaplain to a juvenile detention center and a women's prison. He was instrumental in bringing the Seeds ministry from Decatur, GA, where it was born, to its new home at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX—and his generous nurture of the work was vital to our survival in the early years. He currently serves on the Seeds Board of Advisors.*

*Those who follow the will of God and have a voice and resources are called to speak for and represent those who have no voice, both teaching all God's children about communal responsibility, and offering them avenues of care response.*



*art by Peter Yuichi Clark*

# Can You See Them?

by Erin B. Conaway

Text: Luke 16:19-31

Have you ever noticed that when you are thinking about something, it pops up more and more in your life? Here's one silly example: many years ago when we lived in Houston, we were looking for a new car and, since we have been a Toyota family for all of our family life, I was looking at Toyotas and noticed the RAV4. It's a sporty little car—a cross between an SUV that was picked

*It seems that at least part of what we should learn from this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that blindness to those in need is inexcusable.*

before it was ripe and the reliable Camry, which I was driving at the time. We went and looked at a few at used sales lot, but we like to ease into these bigger purchases, so we were just looking on that first run.

But something crazy happened to me that week: Houston exploded with RAV4s! They were everywhere! I would see them at traffic lights. They would speed by me on the Loop. Even in our neighborhood and by the school, I noticed all of these RAV4s. I could see them in all different colors and different styles—some with sunroofs, some with lines down the side, some with four-wheel drive and others without. They were everywhere and I'd never seen them before. Or they just exploded onto the scene after I thought about wanting one.

Here's a more profound example of the same thing. A dear friend of mine was asked by one of his ministers to sit on the church advisory board of a homeless ministry in Houston. He was looking for a way to get more involved in church life and to grow in his faith, so he said yes—even though he had no experience in working with the homeless.

Wanting to be a good board member, he asked the organization what he should do before his first meeting. They told him to come by for the tour and then schedule a night when he could ride out with them in the van to take food and blankets to some of the homeless camps around town. So he did.

We had lunch not long after that, and I asked him how his new board appointment

was going. He dropped his fork, looked me in the eye and started crying. He said, "They're everywhere. I didn't know. But they're everywhere!"

"Who?" I asked, worried that he'd gone bonkers.

*My sisters and brothers who don't have a place to live. There are homeless people everywhere! I didn't see them before, but they are all around our church. They're by the places I go to eat. They're even way up north by my office building and the airport. I didn't see them before. I couldn't see them before, and now I can't stop seeing them. When did this happen? We have to do something about this. Why haven't we been doing something about this?*

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells a story about a rich man and Lazarus. The story begins with a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple was the color of royalty; you all know that. Jesus is making sure we understand that this man is in the upper strata of the upper crust. Jesus even goes so far as to describe to us the kind of underwear he wears. The fine linen would have probably been from Egypt; his linen ephod was of the finest material in the land.

And we're told he feasted sumptuously every day. No one did that. The feasts were special occasions. That means that, for this rich man, every day was special and deserving of a feast. It's as if every day was Thanksgiving and all of the hoopla and the opulence that goes into that meal was repeated daily.

Thanksgiving at many homes leaves a lot of leftovers. Can you imagine how much food would pile up if you did that every day? I suspect it would be a great deal, and this story is being told in a time before Ziploc bags and



art by Curtis Cannon

refrigeration. The rich man is at the top of his game—living the dream and enjoying the ride immensely.

Lazarus was the exact opposite. The New Revised Standard Version says he lay at the gate. The Greek says he *was laid* at the gate, probably by townspeople who didn't know what else to do with him. They couldn't sustain him and thought perhaps the rich man would have mercy on him and provide for him from his wild excess. So they took Lazarus and laid him at the rich man's gate.

The fact that the man had a gate is another indicator of his crazy riches. They laid Lazarus there, so now the problem is no longer theirs, but now it's at the feet or the gate of the rich man. They've done what they think they could do, so they just leave him there.

Lazarus longs to fill his belly with the scraps that fall from the rich man's table. He's not asking for a seat at the table; he's just hoping to get a portion of what goes to the dogs. Instead, he is humiliated further by the dogs that have eaten the food he would have gladly eaten, and now they are licking his wounds as if to polish off their meal with a dessert of his misery. He's too weak to chase them away, and no one cares enough about him to shoo the dogs away from him. Maybe they just don't see him.

Then Lazarus dies and the angels carry him away to be with Abraham. (Maybe that's because no one else would care for his body.) The rich man also dies and is buried, and, in the afterlife, he realizes things are upside down. The first is now last and the last is first. This can't be! He was living the dream! Why is he so tormented? He looks around and, above him, he can see Father Abraham with Lazarus nestled safely by his side.

Being a rich man, he was used to giving orders and having them met—people just did things for him—so he calls out to Abraham, "Have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." He wants Lazarus to serve him even while he is in Hades. He still can't see Lazarus as anything but a servant who should still meet his needs.

Abraham shares the bad news and begins by calling him child—implying that just being a child of Abraham won't save you and keep you from the flames. This had to sting the audience who was hearing it for the first time, those who hung their hats on being the children of Abraham.

But the rich man doesn't get it. Even in the afterlife, the rich man still cannot see his brother Lazarus.

In an iconic Depression-era photograph by Dorothea Lange, Florence Owens Thompson is pictured with two of her children hiding their dirty heads behind her shoulders while she loosely holds her baby in her arms. The look of absolute despair rests gently on her face. She isn't crying out, her dusty cheeks are not streaked with tears, and her eyes are looking out as if scanning the horizon for some sign of light or hope.

This picture was taken in 1936, during the Dust Bowl days. It came to epitomize the plight of so many who were

dragged into poverty by the economic crisis. Florence had just sold the tires off of her car to buy food for her children.

That photograph brought the suffering of a nation into undeniable sight, and some say it enlivened the resolve of the government to help our country rise up from the dusty ruins of the Great Depression.

*We are called to see our sisters and brothers in this world and respond to them as sisters and brothers and not property to be used up and disregarded.*

In 1994, Kevin Carter photographed a little Sudanese boy curled up with his forehead on the ground. His little emaciated body is naked except for the necklace of shells he wears around his neck. Just a few feet behind him, a vulture, about the same size as this malnourished child of God, is stalking him with curved beak and determined eyes.

This Pulitzer Prize winning, disturbing image changed the global response to the hunger crisis in Sudan and the broad famine in Africa. We could see one of our children literally starving to death. We began to act to help address the hunger and absolute poverty in Africa.

In 1968, the world saw itself for the first time as NASA published, from space, an image of the Earth rising over the moon. Our beautifully stunning planet, with its blue oceans and white clouds and barely discernable land masses, looked so majestic in space, especially in contrast to the surface of the moon in the foreground of the picture.

Many credit this photograph for the creation and encouragement of the modern environmentalist movement. People saw the Earth for the first time and realized this is a gift to us that must be cherished and loved—not just something to be exploited and abused at our whim and desire. When we see something or someone, our lives change. We are now bound together with them in our common humanity, our common struggle for life.

Just as my friend suddenly began to see homeless people all around him everywhere he went, we have seen people and images throughout modern history that represent events in our world. And this has brought us to action. It has caused us to respond to those in need.

It seems that at least part of what we should learn from this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that blindness to those in need is inexcusable. Even being a child of Abraham didn't get the rich man off the hook for not seeing his brother Lazarus, slowly dying at his gate while the sumptuous elements of the feast ran down his beard and onto his floor.

We are called to see our sisters and brothers in this world and respond to them as sisters and brothers and not property to be used up and disregarded.

Images have been changing us for decades, but, in the last few years, it seems something has changed. We recently saw a picture of the body of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Kurdish boy, washed up on a Mediterranean shore after his family's tragic attempt to escape the war-ravaged terrain of Syria failed.<sup>1</sup>

People said this would change the hearts of our world toward the refugees among us and toward those who are

*I don't know what has changed  
from the early part of last  
century when we seemed to be  
affected by the people we saw.  
Maybe we see too many and  
we're just overwhelmed.*

living in massive refugee tent camps.

But just a few months later, an attack triggered a renewed call in many countries to keep them out and send them back. We are still struggling with our own response to this crisis today, but it seems that, even though we saw this horrifying image of one of our children washed ashore like ocean garbage, we still can't see refugees as sisters and brothers. We keep seeing them as threats and burdens.

When this image was published, people said this would change the global response to the crisis in Syria—that it would stop the massive civilian casualties that keep stacking up, as the world seems content to bomb both sides until no one is left to complain. Seeing this little boy, who is by no means an enemy combatant or in any way involved in the civil war—this was supposed to cause the people of the world to put unprecedented pressure on our leaders to bring an end to this war.

But we're not protesting. We're not marching in the streets for this little boy and his country. Maybe it's because the problem and the solution are complicated and won't fit on a poster, or maybe it's because we still cannot see him as our child.

I hear so vividly in the outcry of the African American community,

*You don't see us. You're not seeing us. You're just seeing a stereotype of violence and drugs and hate, but we're not that anymore than you are. We're sisters and brothers and we are afraid and angry that it seems our society isn't willing to see us.*

And I wonder how many of you feel the same thing. You feel completely invisible in this world and perhaps even in this community of faith. You wonder if anyone can see your pain or your shame or your frustration with how your life is turning out. You wonder if we will simply

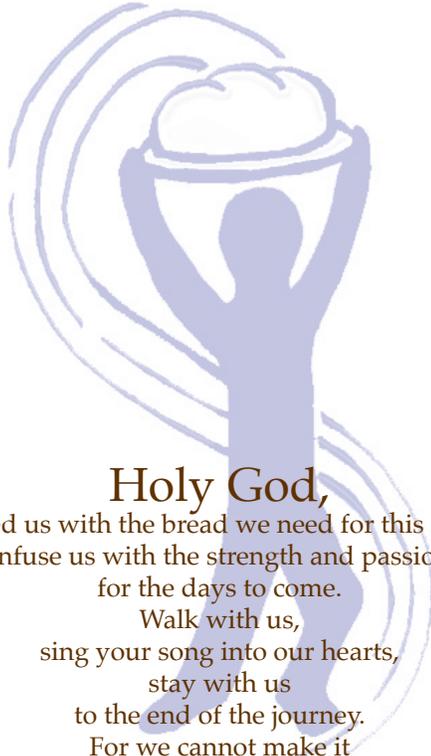
lay you at the gate of someone else and make you their problem rather than treating you like family and doing our best to bind up your wounds and acknowledge your existence among us.

I don't know what has changed from the early part of last century when we seemed to be affected by the people we saw. Maybe we see too many and we're just overwhelmed. The rich man wasn't condemned in the parable for being blind to those a world away. He missed the man at his own gate. So perhaps we should start looking close to home, even within ourselves, and ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate our sisters and brothers in our midst—to help us to see ourselves and our neighbors and then find the courage to love them. The parable implies that this blindness to neighbor can also make us blind to God's presence in our lives. May the scales fall from our eyes and may God give us renewed vision for one another and for our world. Amen.

—Erin Conaway, a native of Midland, TX, is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. He is a generous contributor to Seeds publications and is a valued member of the Sacred Seasons liturgical team.

### Endnote

1. Editor's note: This image appeared on the worship guide at Seventh & James Baptist Church the day that Erin Conaway preached this sermon. The little boy's brother and mother also drowned in the family's flight from Syria.



**Holy God,**  
Feed us with the bread we need for this day.  
Infuse us with the strength and passion  
for the days to come.  
Walk with us,  
sing your song into our hearts,  
stay with us  
to the end of the journey.  
For we cannot make it  
without you.  
Amen.

—John Garland and Katie Cook

art by Sharon S. Rollins

# The True Test of Love

by Laura Mayo

Texts: Matthew 14:13-21, Matthew 15:10-39

*(The sermon begins after the reading of Matthew 14:13-21)*

Five loaves and two fish and 5,000, not counting women and children, are fed. After the meal there are 12 baskets full of leftovers. This story is familiar. This miracle math is well known.

What may not be as well known, however, is the feeding story in the very next chapter. In Matthew 15, beginning with verse 32, we read:

*Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Jesus asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." Then, ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and, after giving thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over—seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were 4,000 men, besides women and children.*

This story is almost identical, and yet the math has changed. Seven loaves of bread and a few fish feed 4,000, not counting women and children. When they've all eaten their fill, there are seven baskets of leftovers.

These two feeding stories form an *inclusio*<sup>1</sup> and beg us to consider what is being bracketed. Perhaps it is not surprising that these two feeding stories are separated by narratives connected to eating and the table. Shortly after the five loaves and two fish feeding thousands, Jesus gets into a debate with the Scribes and Pharisees concerning food laws, saying:

*Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth*

*enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.*

*Sandwiched between two miracles where thousands are fed, Matthew gives us a very human Jesus interacting with a Canaanite woman.*

The debate continues until, and I quote:

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

After this encounter, Jesus goes up a mountain. He is followed by the crowds. He heals and teaches and then, having compassion on them, he feeds the hungry thousands with seven loaves of bread and a few fish.

Sandwiched between two miracles where thousands are fed,



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Matthew gives us a very human Jesus interacting with a Canaanite woman. Jesus is callous, prejudiced, and cruel to the Canaanite woman.

Matthew's choice of the word *Canaanite* is meaningful. By the time of Jesus, people were no longer called "Canaanites." This name was no longer on the map. Matthew chooses *Canaanite* on purpose: this woman is part of an enemy people—a long-acknowledged, culturally approved enemy.

*Matthew has surrounded the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman with feeding stories: one with 12 baskets of leftovers, 12 for the 12 tribes of Israel, and the other, after Jesus' prejudices are exposed and turned to compassion, with seven baskets of leftovers, seven for all the nations.*

Jesus' prejudice is not that of a moment. This is the prejudice of a lifetime, the prejudice of many generations, the prejudice of an entire culture—the kind that seeps into our bones and is there whether we acknowledge it or not.

This kind of prejudice has Jesus calling this woman a dog; the same Jesus who has welcomed outcasts and sinners, who has looked with compassion on crowd after crowd, who has healed and fed and taught, begins by offering this woman nothing but insults.

"Listen and understand, Jesus says. "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." When Jesus meets the Canaanite woman, his heart speaks through his mouth and his prejudice is out in the open. "I came for the sheep of Israel—not for the dogs."

Jesus does not know this woman except in the way that any of us know the Other, the one held in contempt by our own prejudice. But she seems to know Jesus. While not of his religion, she addresses him as "Son of David." She begs him to heal her daughter. The disciples want nothing to do with her: "Send her away!" they tell Jesus.

That's what they tried to do not long ago when faced with more than 5,000 hungry people. "Send the crowds away," the disciples said. "You give them something to eat," Jesus replied. Where is that care and compassion now? Jesus, who fed thousands, who has kept table with those considered unworthy, this same Jesus tells the desperate woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But the Canaanite woman is undaunted. The life of her daughter is at stake. She picks up his words and throws them right back: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table."

When Jesus hears this, he says, "Woman, great is your faith!" But she simply spoke the truth: the children have been fed—5,000 men, besides women and children. Twelve baskets of food were leftover—12 baskets for the 12 tribes of Israel. Surely the feeding doesn't stop there. Surely, the woman says, surely there's enough for me and my daughter. In Jesus, the woman found an opportunity for her daughter to be healed. And in the woman, Jesus found an opportunity to be healed of his own racism, arrogance and cruelty.

Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the realm of God. Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman. Matthew is telling us something with these feeding stories, something much more powerful than the magic or miracle of enough food for the gathered crowd.

In the second feeding story, just after Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, seven loaves of bread and a few fish feed 4,000 men—plus women and children, and there are seven baskets left over. Seven is the biblical number of wholeness, completeness, a number encompassing the nations.

Matthew has surrounded the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman with feeding stories: one with 12 baskets of leftovers, 12 for the 12 tribes of Israel, and the other, after Jesus' prejudices are exposed and turned to compassion, with seven baskets of leftovers, seven for all the nations.

The Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserved to be welcomed to the table. After this encounter, Jesus went on to feed those who had not yet been fed—broadening his compassion and his welcome.

*Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.... What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.*

People's hearts are speaking in the legislature, on city streets, on radio stations, in special sessions, media briefings and on social media. We are hearing fear and hate pour from mouths and cell phones and Twitter accounts.

The Canaanite woman bravely challenges the prejudice pouring from Jesus' mouth, from his heart. She confronts him with his own hypocrisy, much as Jesus has done for the religious leaders over and over. The real miracle in these stories may just be that Jesus listens, he sees his fear and his bias—and he changes.

Where and when do we need to be the Canaanite woman speaking for justice, speaking for those who are being maligned and abused; speaking for our trans

*“What comes out of the mouth  
proceeds from the heart,  
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siblings, for immigrants, for women’s health, for black lives? Where and when do we need to be Jesus, willing to look at our own hearts, examine what comes from our mouths, confronting our own bias and our own hatred, and being willing to change.

“Love your enemies.” Jesus’ ideal is hard to live into—hard even for Jesus—but it is no less necessary for being difficult. And it is difficult. How can we love those who hate? How can we love those who use God as an excuse for hate, slander, rejection, abuse, injustice?

Love. Not emotional bosh—strong, demanding love. The Canaanite woman loved Jesus; Jesus loved the religious leaders. Love confronts injustice. Love won’t let prejudice, fear, and hatred have the last word. Love won’t let them have the last act. Amen.

—*Laura Mayo is the pastor of Covenant Church in Houston, TX. Covenant, although suffering from flood damage itself, was a gathering place for assistance when Hurricane Harvey hit the Gulf Coast last September.*

### Endnote

1. In biblical studies, an inclusio is a literary device in which the writer creates a bracket or frame by placing similar material at the beginning or end of a section.

## We become more human

as we discover we are able to love people.

And when I say “love people,”

I mean to see their value and their beauty,  
to love people who have been pushed aside,  
humiliated, seen as having no value.

Then we see that they are  
gradually being changed.

At the same time, sharing our lives  
in community with the weak and the poor,  
we come in touch with our own  
limits, pain, and brokenness.

We realize that we, too, have our handicaps  
which are often around our need for power  
and the feeling that our value  
lies in being powerful—  
a power that frequently involves  
crushing other people.

So we’re confronted by two visions  
of society:

a vision of a pyramid,  
where you have to have more  
and more power  
in order to get to the top,  
or a vision of a body  
where every person has a place.

—Jean Vanier



art by Sharon Rollins

# Bearing God's Image in a Starving World

by Jake Raabe

Text: Genesis 1

Beginnings are important. The first chapter sets the tone of a novel. Politicians giving speeches make their most striking claims at the beginning to gain the attention of their audience. The beginning of something tells you what you can expect from the rest of it. It's no surprise, then, that scripture opens with the beginning of all beginnings. The first chapter of the Bible tells us that the grand story of both scripture and the universe within which it exists ultimately arc towards the Creator. Far too easily we forget the majesty and power of the creation narrative.

*The existence of world hunger proves that we are failing in our job as bearers of God's image.*

In the beginning, there was nothing. What does nothing look like? According to Genesis, it's like a deep, deep ocean with a violent wind roaring over it. It's pitch black. God looks out over the meaningless, violent chaos and says, "Light...come into being!" And light bursts out of the darkness across the waters. Then God says "Land, come into being!" And dry land comes up out of the water.

And then God makes plants come up from the land, grass and bushes and trees of every kind. Then God takes some of the light and balls it together and puts it in the sky. And then God does the same thing again, but smaller. God gives each of the balls of light their own time, and calls the first one's time "day" and the second one's time "night."

And then God makes fish and whales and sea creatures and puts them in the ocean, and God makes birds of every shape and size and color and he puts them in the sky, and then God makes cows and zebras and giraffes and donkeys and cats and dogs and monkeys, and spreads them all over the earth, in habitats built just for them.

And God looks out at all that has been done, at the oceans and the skies and all the land, and it is good. But God isn't done yet. God does one last thing, and that thing God does next is why what we do with our resources matters so much. God makes man, and then makes woman. But God does something special with them, something God hasn't done with any other part of creation: God says, "Let us make humankind in our

image." Only after doing this is the creating complete. Only after stamping God's own image on humans does God call the world "very good."

What does this phrase, "in God's image," mean? The word "image" (Hebrew *tselem*) is used in two ways in the Bible. First, it can be a representation of something, like we usually use the word today. The same word used here is also used to describe statues of gods and kings in lots of other places in the Bible.

Additionally, though, the word "image" can refer to someone who does something on behalf of another person. When a king sent out letters, he used a signet ring to stamp a design in wax onto the letter. That was his *image*; it was how you knew that that letter came from the king himself. This seems to be how the writer of Genesis uses this word.

Being made in the image of God means having a special responsibility as God's representative. In Genesis 2:15, the Bible says that God made man *le'av-dach ulsham-rach haaretz*. That literally means "to serve and to protect the Earth." The honor of being created as God's ambassador is followed swiftly by a specification of responsibility. Being an image-bearer of God means taking care of creation—the world God created, the animals God put within it, and other people who are in need of help. God's image is a sign that brings great responsibility with its presence.

This makes hunger a deeply spiritual issue. God provides for God's creation. There is currently enough food in the world for every person to have a 3,000-calorie-



art by Robert Darden

a-day diet. God has provided and will provide enough for all. The existence of world hunger proves that we are failing in our job as bearers of God's image. If we followed God's charge to take care of the world's resources and those in need, this wouldn't be the case. The failure is on our part, not God's.

One way in which we are particularly failing as stewards of creation is the sheer amount of food that we throw away. In the United States, we throw away an incredible 40 percent of the food we produce. Stop to consider that: almost half of the food in the US goes to landfills and dumpsters while 48.8 million people living

*Hunger is a deeply spiritual issue because the fulfillment of needs is the expression of divine sovereignty and creation.*

here don't have enough food to eat. As a country, we're wasting \$165 billion every year on food we don't eat. That's 20 pounds of food thrown away per person *every month*. God has provided for our needs, but we squander that provision so that almost 50 million people in this country alone don't have what they need.

All of this wasted food has serious consequences: it has to be put somewhere, which means more land has to be converted into landfills, and rotting food produces methane gas that harms our atmosphere. Producing food takes resources: water, land, animal feed, and so on. Producing food consumes resources, and producing food to throw away consumes resources unnecessarily. This drives food prices up higher than they would be naturally, making it less accessible to those in poverty. Food waste has a high cost, and it is a price that low-income households end up paying.

Hunger in a world of abundance is a spiritual crisis. God created us in God's image, meaning that we're called to be good and faithful stewards over what God has given us. This is a task at which we're clearly failing. Being a bearer of God's image means caring for God's world and all that is within it: the land, the animals, and—most importantly—the people who themselves are image-bearers.

The Bible is clear on this responsibility. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes the judgment that will occur when he returns:

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the*

*righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:34-40 NRSV)*

For those who fulfill the commission that comes with God's image, Christ promises acceptance and reward from the Father. But here is what happens to those who do not live up to the honor they have been given:

*Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Matthew 25:41-46 NRSV)*

Helping those in need is not an auxiliary or "bonus" portion of the Christian life; it is integral to the very heart of the Christian message, an act that affirms and fulfills our most basic quality as children of the living God. That quality is to be a Christian, to be a person as he or she was meant to be by the Creator.

Hunger is a deeply spiritual issue because the fulfillment of needs is the expression of divine sovereignty and creation. The charge to meet these needs and be stewards of God's creation is one that any examination of our current society shows we are failing. How can we as believers tolerate a world where 48.8 million people in our country alone lack sufficient food while 40 percent of the food we produce is thrown away? Every growling stomach, every family struggling to survive is an indictment of us as creatures made in God's image.

Being God's image bearer is the highest honor and highest responsibility a person will ever receive. Let those of us who profess to be followers of God through Christ take this with the utmost seriousness. The problem is big, but the beginning is easy: don't take more than you need. At the grocery store, remember your responsibility. At a restaurant, keep your responsibility to your brothers and sisters in poverty in mind. Reducing food waste leaves more food for everyone. There's plenty to go around, if only we'll stop wasting the good things God has given us.

—Jake Raabe is a student at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. Sources for statistics: *Feeding America*, National Resource Defense Council.

# Will We Listen to Amos?

by Laura Mayo

Text: Amos 8

*The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day," says the Lord God; "the dead bodies shall be many.... Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.... The Lord has sworn.... Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.... I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation...."*

I wonder if anyone really hears Amos, if anyone really hears God. Liberal people rarely read such passages from the Bible. We tend to shy away from references to God's anger, God's punishment, God's vengeful nature. Our religious brothers and sisters on the other end of

*Amos spoke to a people wrapped up in their nobility, their luxury; a people who thought that their affluence meant that God was pleased with them and their wealth was a sign of a God's favor. Amos disabused them of this notion.*

the spectrum tend to like passages about an angry God, but it's too easy to think that God is angry at the same people we are.

Who is Amos talking to? Is anyone listening?

Amos is not invited to speak. He barges into a service already in progress. He interrupts the priest Amaziah, and he has already been asked to leave. The priest suggests that he go to Judah, where he came from, and earn his bread and shout his prophecy there. But Amos refuses to leave. He says that God has sent him to Israel. He just keeps talking. The service is ruined. The worship bulletins are now obsolete.

God directs Amos to the display of wealth and power, the full basket of summer fruit adorning the altar. "Amos, what do you see?" God says. And Amos says, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the Lord says to Amos, "The end has come upon my people Israel...."

The word play is lost in translation. The word for fruit and the word for end sound extremely similar in Hebrew: *qayits* and *qets*.

Look, Amos. See the fruit basket festooning the high altar at Bethel? Look, Amos. See the signs of the end decorating the altar?

The high priest, Amaziah, is praising YHWH for the abundant harvest, for the many gifts God has bestowed on a grateful and worthy people, when Amos interrupts: "Your basket of fruit is no sign of your greatness. It is a symbol of your imminent end!"

"The end indeed," many whisper, until some more courageous souls begin to demand rather more loudly that the man and his blasphemy be expelled from this holy place.

Even with all the noise, some seem not to notice. A group of wealthy businessmen hold a whispered conversation:

"When will the Sabbath be over? These cursed monthly rituals just get in the way of business."

"Exactly. I just want to get back to grain sales. I rigged my scales so that the weight of the wheat will look greater than it is. Our profits will double at least. In fact, that weight will really be greater, because I have charged my slaves to leave the sweepings in with the wheat for sale!"

Amos hears and his fury increases. He launches a tirade:

*Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land! YHWH has sworn, "I will never forget any of your deeds!" The land will tremble and all will mourn as the ground heaves and*



*rocks, rising and falling like the great river Nile. Your feasts will become dirges, your hymns lamentations; you will wear sackcloth, your finely coiffed hair will fall out, and you will weep as if your only son had died! (Amos 8:4, 7-10)*

Is anyone listening?

Some 30 years after Amos' brief prophetic life, northern Israel was utterly destroyed by the mighty Assyrian army. The Northern Kingdom disappeared from the pages of history. The Assyrians deported or murdered all the leaders, planted their own people on the land, and some 500 years later that mixed race of people was known as the Samaritans.

There is nothing to suggest that Amos' words had any palpable effect during his own time. And yet, his words still live in the pages of our Bible. Amos is interrupting our typical service; interrupting our typical lives; looking at the symbols of our wealth; asking us to listen.

Amos spoke to a people wrapped up in their nobility, their luxury; a people who thought that their affluence meant that God was pleased with them and their wealth was a sign of God's favor. Amos disabused them of this notion.

"God is not pleased with you," he cried:

*You have forgotten justice. You have exploited the poor, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes. God is angry. God will not forget what you have done. Your rejoicing and your splendor are coming to an end soon they will be replaced with weeping and bodies in the streets.*

At Youth Camp this year, we were asked to consider what God is not. We spent our time in Bible study and in worship considering what we knew about God—getting to that knowledge by considering the underside. The first day of Bible study we asked the youth to answer this question: Is God violent?

The youth spent more time considering this question than we might. And when they began to answer, they did not agree. The youth argued their points. They used Bible verses (there are plenty—plenty that make the case that God is not violent and plenty that make the case that God is), they used personal experience, they used all of their young theologian tools and finally decided they could not convince each other.

I don't believe God is violent. I can believe God is angry. I don't think about God's anger much and I am quite certain I have never suggested that God is angry in a sermon. But Amos is interrupting our normal worship. Interrupting and asking us to listen.

How many evangelists have we heard suggest or just outright say that wealth is a sign of God's favor and blessing? Surely not. God's rage is awakened by the horrible ways we abuse each other; by systems of power that concentrate wealth at the expense of the poor.

Cycles of marginalization, violence, and retribution are playing out over and over and over again in our midst. These things are painful to see. In fact, those who walk through life with privilege might never see them at all. But this is the task of people of faith—to see and to help each other see what is really there. God isn't sending us a fruit basket. God is asking us to see the pain of the world. God is asking us to respond by rooting out the injustice that causes it.

*I don't think about God's anger much and I am quite certain I have never suggested that God is angry in a sermon. But Amos is interrupting our normal worship.*

We are being called to listen, to open ourselves to the vast web of connections where injustices collide, creating not a culture of abundant life for all, but a reality of such vast disparity that children die from hunger while around 70 billion pounds of food is thrown into landfills every year in this country.<sup>1</sup> Such vast disparity that children die from hunger while the greedy gobble more wealth.

In 2005, Thomas Pogge wrote:

*Imagine a public monument to the victims of poverty. Imagine that it resembles the black granite wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and it includes the names of everyone who has died of poverty-related causes since the end of the Cold War 20 years ago. That would be more than 300 million names, mostly children. To make room for so many names, the monument would have to be 480 miles long, roughly the distance from Detroit to New York City. To keep up with the tally of death that continues daily, the length of the wall would have to be extended by half a mile per week.<sup>2</sup>*

This does not please God. God is not blessing us with wealth while the poor are trampled. God speaks for the poor again and again:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you," when you already have it with you (Proverbs 3:27-28).

The wicked go down to the realm of the dead, all the nations that forget God. But God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish (Psalm 9: 17-18).

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the orphan; plead the case of the widow (Isaiah 1:17).

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:17).

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

"The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12).

*God's rage is awakened by the horrible ways we abuse each other; by systems of power that concentrate wealth at the expense of the poor.*

The time may be coming, but right now we have the word of the Lord. We have it.

Will we listen? Amen.

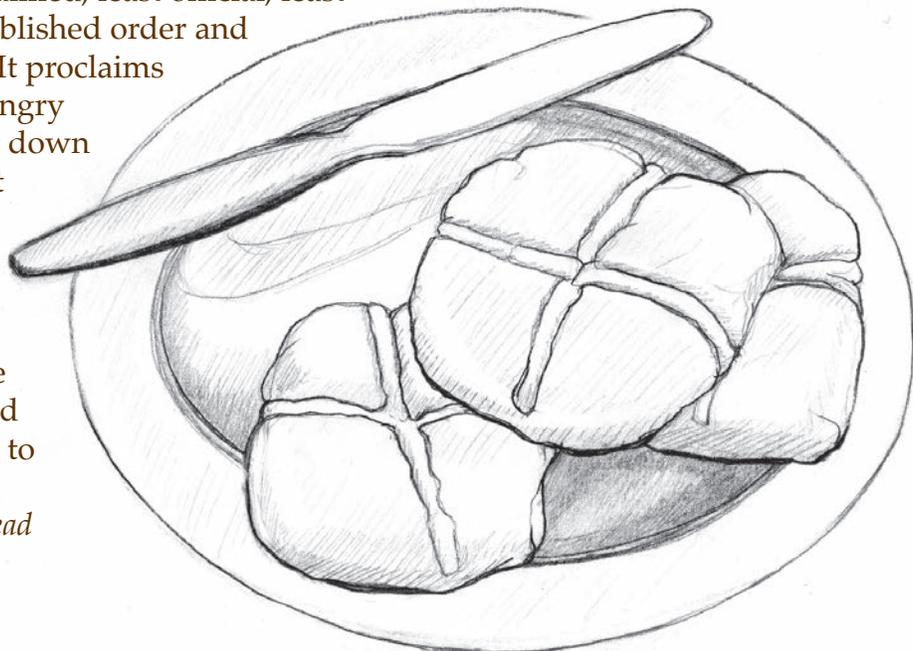
—Laura Mayo is the pastor of Covenant Church in Houston, TX. Covenant, although suffering from flood damage itself, was a gathering place for assistance when Hurricane Harvey hit the Gulf Coast last September. Sacred Seasons readers have seen her sermons in our worship resource packets.

### Endnotes

1. From Feeding America.
2. Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.

**But this is my belief:** that at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us. As I found to my surprise and alarm, it could speak even to me: not in the sappy, Jesus-and-cookies tone of mild-mannered liberal Christianity, or the blustering, blaming hellfire of the religious right. What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same.

—Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*



art by Sally Lynn Askins

# “Please, Sir, I Want Some More”

by Erin Conaway

Text: Exodus 16:2-15

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook’s uniform, stationed himself at the copper. His pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him, the gruel was served out and a long grace was said over the short commons.

The gruel disappeared. The boys whispered to each other and winked at Oliver. His next neighbors nudged him.

Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger and reckless with misery. He rose from the table and, advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity, said: “Please sir, I want some more.”

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment at the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder, the boys with fear.

“What!” said the master at length, in a faint voice.

“Please, sir,” replied Oliver, “I want some more.”

Dickens paints such a vivid and compelling scene in his classic novel *Oliver Twist* and, in many ways, we hear this morning the Israelites crying out to Moses in similar fashion:

*If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*

Okay, let’s be honest; it’s far more compelling to hear the plea of young Oliver than it is the whining complaints of the Israelites.

Verse one in the 16th chapter of Exodus tells us that this complaint about the desert accommodations arose among the people midway through the third month after they left Egypt.

Two months and 15 days it’s been since they left Egypt with all of the things they plundered, and now they are starving. And they say they wish God had killed them in Egypt rather than bringing them out of bondage.

It feels like the kind of thing many of us with young families will

probably have played out in front of us this very day. One of our well-fed children is going to say to us as we are finishing up a conversation here at church, “Mom...we have to go eat NOW...I’m starving....”

“I think I’m going to DIE! Let’s just leave Daddy, it’s his fault for talking too long. We can come get him on Wednesday, but right now we have to go!”

*Okay, let’s be honest; it’s far more compelling to hear the plea of young Oliver than it is the whining complaints of the Israelites.*

But before we put Israel in a time-out, the fact is they really are hungry. And, maybe more importantly, they are scared. Just as painful as the hunger is the prospect of it getting worse, and from their vantage point, they can’t see any reason to hope this is going to get any better.

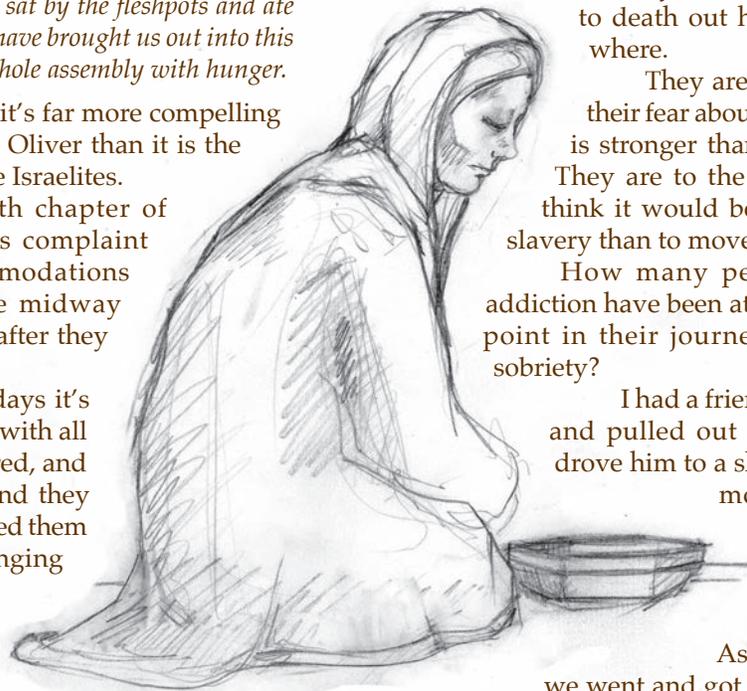
So they panic. “Group-think” begins to build among the wanderers, and the pundits among them start forming the talking points about how, when they were slaves, they ate so very well, but now they are starving to death out here in God-only-knows where.

They are hungry and scared and their fear about an unknown tomorrow is stronger than the pain in their past. They are to the point now where they think it would be better to go back into slavery than to move forward into freedom.

How many people struggling with addiction have been at this very same decision point in their journeys and attempts with sobriety?

I had a friend whom I literally went and pulled out from under a bridge. I drove him to a shelter and then, just two months later, he’d fallen off the wagon again and called me on a Sunday morning to tell me he needed help.

As soon as church was over, we went and got some lunch and went to



art by Sally Lynn Askins

a park to talk and listen. In the midst of his taking stock of where he was, he wondered out loud, “Maybe I’m just a drunk and all I really want is to work enough so I can get a girl and drink a 12-pack and smoke some dope on the weekends.”

His lip was burned from the “meth” he’d smoked the night before. As the words fell to the ground, my love for him came out a little sideways as I said to him,

*If that’s what you really want, then let’s just walk over to that pond and I’ll hold your big dumb head under the water until you die, so we can just get it over with right now. Because what you’re talking about is going to kill you, but it’s going to be slow and painful and hurt a bunch of other people in the process. That’s just time-release suicide.*

I didn’t drown him in the pond that day, and that’s not my typical pastoral approach. But I did hear his pain and sat with him in the midst of it.

Looking at the work required of him to move ahead into sobriety and work the system so he could get a job and find a place to live, it was easy to see how he would want to go back into slavery, even while he was still hung-over from the bondage of the weekend.

It’s not just the people struggling with addictions who are hungry. One in seven people in the world will go to bed actually hungry tonight. The number one health risk in the world today is hunger. It kills more people every year than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. One in seven will go to bed hungry tonight. That’s 925 million people who don’t have enough to eat.<sup>1</sup>

And lest we be fooled and think it’s just the people over there in faraway places (as if that should make it any more palatable), 43,120 residents of McLennan County are food-insecure.

That’s 19 percent—almost one in five of the people we see every day.<sup>2</sup> Or, probably more accurately, we don’t see them. But they are crying out to God and to anyone who could lead them out of this wilderness: “Please, sirs and madams, I want some more....”

Before Moses could take the message to God or even respond to the people, God said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you.”

God was listening. Four times in this brief passage it’s made clear: “The Lord has heard.” God was listening to the Israelites and didn’t respond to their weak and distorted memories—memories that would choose to dwell on the fabrication of bondage and how life was back in Egypt, rather than on the mighty deeds Yahweh had done before them and among them to get them to this point in the journey.

Instead, God responded to their hunger and desperation and their fear, and rained down bread from heaven. The language in this passage is rich with wordplay. One of the things you hear in this text is the repetition of evening and morning and that harkens us back to creation, when God was forming the earth and everything in it.

Part of creation was the naming of things and, in telling irony, as God fed the Israelites in this same pattern, they looked on the ground and said, “What is it?” And that is what they called it: “What is it?” or *manna*.

But they came to learn it was their daily bread.

As we read in the rest of the chapter, there was just enough for each family for each day, and, of course, some of the Israelites failed this test, because they tried to keep

*Instead, God responded to their hunger and desperation and their fear, and rained down bread from heaven.*

some of the manna for the next day and found that it was riddled with worms and in ruins—just like their faith in God’s providing hand.

Here, too, we get the first notion of Sabbath-keeping. God provided a double portion on the sixth day and that would feed them for the sixth and seventh days, so they would not have to go out and gather on the seventh day, because on that day there would be no manna.

Again, though, a few went out on the seventh day to gather manna, but they found none, and they incited God’s anger against them because they just couldn’t quit trying to control their lives—even in the wilderness and in the midst of the miracle of food falling from the heavens.

They clung to their fear and that small self that told them, “There’s not going to be enough tomorrow, so you need to get more today.”

Another thing to note about the language in this passage is that it’s clear that this was supposed to not just be about putting bread in bellies, but also about worship. Moses (through Aaron) invited Israel, the congregation, to “draw near,” or to gather in worship. When they did, they saw “the glory” of God.

Walter Brueggemann writes,

*The complaint of v.3 indicates that Israel still associates “glory” (and the power to give life) with the splendor, wealth, prestige, and extravagance of Egypt. Compared to the glory of Egypt, the wilderness holds little attraction. In drawing near, however, Israel dramatically turns its face away from Egypt, and looks again toward the wilderness. It is not an empty, deathly place, but the locus of God’s sovereign splendor. The wilderness is more brilliant than Egypt, because Yahweh had “gotten glory over Pharaoh.” By God’s rule, the wilderness is completely redefined.<sup>3</sup>*

So the Israelites approached Moses with their hunger and fear, and God fed them day in and day out, but with daily bread, not hoards and stockpiles of food, lest they forget it is God who was acting in their midst.

So what about today? What about our hungry children and neighbors? What about their cries for food?

After the experience in the wilderness, God stopped raining down bread from heaven, but even as Jesus was teaching us to pray, he taught us to ask for our daily bread. Not for truckloads of bread that we might store it up for what we used to say was a rainy day.

But what about our neighbors? Well, Jesus says, “You feed them.”<sup>4</sup>

And in the same way, in the midst of the feeding that happens when we do take on the role of helping our neighbors find daily bread, we discover God’s glory in our midst in ways we had not seen before.

*I can't speak to what is happening in your heart and mind, but for me, when I read this text, the people I most relate to are the ones who tried to keep a little manna for the next day...*

This kind of feeding reveals God’s glory, all around us and in the bond of our fellowship with people to whom we bring daily bread. Talk to any one of our Meals on Wheels volunteers and ask them about the glory they have seen in the midst of their service. Ask them about the relationships that develop between neighbors as we seek to bring them some manna for the day.

When you talk to people who work towards seeing that everyone gets his or her daily bread, you can see it in their eyes: a mixture of more to do and the glory of things they have seen done by God’s hand, through the hands of God’s children at work, feeding the hungry here and all around the world.

But still, there are millions of our sisters and brothers who are desperate with hunger and reckless with misery and who are still saying, “Please sir, I want some more.”

If this is just another encounter with a text that reminds us of God’s heart to feed God’s children, and the miraculous way God did it with the Israelites as they were brought out of slavery, and if it serves only to ping us again with a little more guilt about the hungry in our world, and to make us feel bad as we gather around tables of abundance immediately after this service to eat lunch, then I think we will have done a disservice to the text and to our worship this morning.

I keep thinking about why it is that most of us aren’t more involved in doing our part about the raging hunger in our world. Why is it that we can hear statistics like the ones I mentioned earlier and have an immediate emotive reaction that then doesn’t produce any real results?

I can’t speak to what is happening in your heart and mind, but for me, when I read this text, the people I most relate to are the ones who tried to keep a little manna for the next day—the ones who went out on the Sabbath looking for manna, wondering if what they had in their

tents from yesterday was going to be the last manna they saw, or if there would be more on the ground tomorrow.

They are the ones I seem to understand most in this story. Somehow, the miracles of yesterday get lost in my mind as I consider the hunger of today.

The weight of God’s movement in my life historically doesn’t seem to carry the day like it should when I think about what we are going to eat, and what we are going to wear. I worry, and that makes me want to gather more and be in control of tomorrow. And I suspect I’m not alone.

We have such a hard time living on daily bread—believing that the same God who loved us and provided for us yesterday and all the yesterdays before that, that same God still loves us today and will continue to provide for us.

I’m learning with my friend who is a recovering addict, in the midst of rebounds and relapses, that there is a lot of wisdom in taking *just* our daily bread. He is teaching me the strength in not worrying about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring enough trouble of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

This doesn’t mean that we won’t ever be hungry—there are many lessons that our hunger can teach us that we seem to be unable to learn in the absence of hunger. It doesn’t mean that we won’t be hungry, but I think it means that we can be satisfied if we follow our hunger, past the things that would give us a false sense of fullness, to the bread that God longs for us to eat.

I think it means the very bread of life, the bread of Christ’s broken body that was given to us, not so we could be rich and famous and find glory for ourselves in the glitz of eggshell fortune, but that we might see God’s glory and be drawn ever closer to God and to one another.

Those who ate the manna and found in it something that did far more than fill their bellies, even in the wilderness, found they could see God’s glory, shining brightly all around, and they were fed. May we find satisfaction in our daily bread, may we be about the work of helping others to find daily bread too, that we might all find satisfaction, not in the fullness of our stomachs, but in the opening of our eyes to see God’s glory and want some more. Amen.

—Erin Conaway, a native of Midland, TX, is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. He is a generous contributor to Seeds publications and is a valued member of the Sacred Seasons liturgical team.

## Endnotes

1. From the World Food Programme and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. See page 19 for more facts about hunger in the world
2. From the Texas Hunger Initiative’s “Hunger By the Numbers: a Blueprint for Ending Hunger in Texas” ([www.baylor.edu/texashunger](http://www.baylor.edu/texashunger)).
3. Walter Brueggemann in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) v. 1, p. 813.

# Go & Do Likewise: Hearing the Good Samaritan Story as Adults

by Marsha C. Martie

Text: Luke 10:25-37

**J**ust then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

[Jesus] said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denari, gave

them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

—Luke 10:25-37

How often do we use our knowledge to keep us from living—to keep us from a deep love relationship with God and from caring for those in need?

**T**his passage of scripture, the story of the Good Samaritan, is quite familiar. It’s a story that’s been told to us since childhood, and so I think the difficulty with it now is learning to hear it with adult ears.

The author of Luke tells us this is something that happened on “one occasion.” So he is, at this time, telling stories that are not necessarily in order; he’s just making sure this event, one that he considered important, got into the manuscript. And so he tells this now-familiar story.

As a child, I was taught to focus on the parable. The parable told me to love my neighbor and my neighbor meant those in need. And indeed, this is an important story and point.

But now, as adults, we need to look more deeply at the whole story and gain knowledge for action. That’s one very important reason we need knowledge—so we know how to act.

But that’s not why this lawyer wanted Jesus’ answer, was it? He wasn’t seeking knowledge for action. He sought knowledge for justification.

It’s important that we look carefully at this man, because he did what we so often do. He started out with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ answer was simple for one who knew and worked with the law everyday.

Jesus essentially answered his question with a question: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” In other words, “What do you already know?”



art by Sally Lynn Askins

And the lawyer answered with what he already knew, and knew well. For his answer came from the *Shema*, which is a command, but it is more than a command:

*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*

He knew the *Shema* well; all of his life he had known this prayer, the prayer of all Israel. It was the first prayer

*This story teaches us that life is not found where our culture teaches us to look for it. It isn't in self-preservation and indulgence. Rather, life is found in self-giving.*

he breathed in the morning, and it was the last prayer he whispered at night. For every observant Jew, day began and still begins with these words. To the *Shema*, the lawyer, with his vast store of knowledge, added and aptly summed up the rest of the law with “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Clearly he was knowledgeable.

But Jesus’ answer gave the lawyer away. There was a problem—a gap between what he knew and what he did. Jesus told him his answer was right and, if he would apply his knowledge in *doing*, he would live.

But the lawyer gave himself away when, to justify himself, he asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

I hate to think how often this happens: how often we know what to do—our knowledge is equal to the challenge—but our hearts too often seek justification for not acting. And so Jesus, apparently unperturbed by the lawyer’s question, told the parable of the Good Samaritan. John S. McClure speaks of the radical ethic contained in this parable:

*The notion that one’s good deeds are building up capital that can be cashed in on the judgment day is common in Western culture. Jesus’ radical ethic, however, refuses to recognize as real life anything that is not a life of self-giving love toward neighbor and God. In other words, we are not even considered alive from a divine perspective until or unless we are living-as-love. True life, in God’s reign, is predicated on love of God and neighbor.*

*How different is this image of life from the options presented to us by our culture and often by our religious leaders. On the one hand, a life of self-giving love is a far cry from “the good life” of “grabbing all the gusto” one can get. On the other hand, it is very different from the life of legalistic and ritualistic perfection in which one lives according*

*to certain rules and doctrines, never straying from certain safe patterns of action. Somewhere just around the corner from hedonism and legalism we encounter, like the lawyer, the simple love-ethic of the Bible. In discovering this ethic we begin to see that it may actually constitute the one true “alternative life-style” that will breathe life into ourselves and into the world in which we live.<sup>1</sup>*

How often do we use our knowledge to keep us from living—to keep us from a deep love relationship with God and from caring for those in need? We need to be intentionally about the business of closing the gap between what we know and what we do.

But how do we do this?

Carry this passage of scripture with you this week. Pray with it and try to live it with the help of the Spirit of Jesus in you. Each time you are stopped by fear,

- (1) remember that love casts out fear;
- (2) examine your fear;
- (3) determine strategies for overcoming your fear.

Celebrate every victory over fear! Tell someone who will rejoice with you; pray in thanksgiving; dance—like Rocky Balboa at the top of the stairs in the movie *Rocky*.

This story teaches us that life is not found where our culture teaches us to look for it. It isn’t in self-preservation and indulgence—rather, life is found in self-giving.

And finally, be careful not to use your knowledge to talk yourself out of life.

—Marsha Martie is pastor of CrossTies Ecumenical Church in Waco, TX, a small but vital congregation of Christians at home in one of the city’s most poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Marsha was mentored by the late Gordon Cosby, founder of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, a large network of Christian activists and ministries focused on living out faith in practical, everyday service to their neighbors.

## Endnote

1. John S. McClure, Pentecost one, *Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year*, Series C (Proclamation Five); Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress: 1994, page 57.

*Whatever else the true preaching of the word would need to include, it at least would have to be a word that speaks from the perspective of those who have been crushed and marginalized in our society. It would need to be a word of solidarity, healing and love in situations of brokenness and despair and a disturbing and troubling word of justice to those who wish to protect their privilege by exclusion.*

—Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round*

# “But the People Are Thirsty”

by Kyndall Rae Rothaus

Text: Exodus 17:1-7

If you’ve ever taken a trip with a group of people, then you know there’s usually a point along the way where the travelers get grouchy. When you’re that up-and-close with people for long periods of time, things can get testy.

Last year, when my sister got engaged, she wanted our family to meet her fiance’s family, so they rented a vacation lodge. It would be two families who’d never met—11 people, plus two dogs, in one house, for five days. After she pitched the idea, my dad told my mom, “I don’t want to stay five days with 11 people I do know.”

*By this point in the story, Moses wasn’t in the best of moods either, and the people’s complaints were getting on his ever-living nerve.*

The soon-to-be newlyweds were excited, but some of us introverts were a bit more skeptical. As it turned out, the joint-family trip went quite well. We enjoyed one another’s company, and the skeptics among us were pleasantly surprised. It didn’t hurt that the members of my brother-in-law’s family were all excellent cooks.

Every day was a feast that brought us happily to the table. With a plate of good, rich food in front of you and a glass of wine in hand, the conversation flowed easily and the developing bond felt natural. We chatted about recipes and family traditions. Afterward, we washed dishes together, stored leftovers and asked if anyone wanted more wine.

Food had this way of bringing us together.

I remember another trip I took in college to the remote interior of Alaska. For the last leg of our journey, we got up very, very early in the morning and took a small, six-seat plane to a very small village where we awaited our boat ride down the Yukon. We hadn’t eaten since the day before, and no one had thought to bring snacks. Upon arrival, we hurried through the little town to find its one-and-only store—but, to our dismay, the store was closed and didn’t open for another two hours.

We waited. The two hours came and went, the store was still closed, and we got our first lesson about village time. “Schedule” was a loose term. The store would open when the store opened, and our boat would arrive when the boat arrived. We

wondered which would come first. We tried not to act too “hangry.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the little convenient store opened, and we went inside immediately. We hunted down a box of crackers, a block of cheese, and a roll of sausage, which we sliced using a pocketknife sterilized with hand sanitizer. We sat midday along the bank of the Yukon River, passing around cheese slices and crackers for breakfast, and I am here to tell you, it was the best tasting meal I’ve ever eaten.

Food has this way of bringing people together and rejuvenating our spirits.

When the Israelites were traveling through the wilderness, they hit that point where travelers get grouchy, and their grouching is recorded in Holy Scripture for all to see. If someone were to write a story about me, I’d prefer to have my best side showing. In other words, don’t you dare start recording when I’m hungry.

But, alas, the Bible never shies away from the raw, not-so-glamorous in humanity. In the book of Exodus, chapter 16, directly before the story we read today, the Hebrew people not only hit the grouching point, they went far beyond it to the point where there was no hiding the hangry. And they had not a drop of energy left for pleasantries. They complained and complained, until finally God rained down quail from the heavens and made manna appear with the morning dew.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

The only catch was that each person could only gather enough food for the day. If you tried to gather more, it would rot. But the next day God would do it all over again, as if to say, “You really can trust me.”

But trust doesn’t come easily when you’re wandering through a wilderness, as I am sure you are aware. God had no sooner provided manna and quail than another complaint rose up among the people.

There was no water and they were thirsty! Why, oh why did they leave Egypt behind, beautiful Egypt where

*You and I live in this in-between space,  
where we are both the thirsty and the  
well fed. We are both the wanderer  
and the homesteader.  
We are both the comforted  
and the uncomfortable.*

there was plenty of food and drink and stability? Surely slavery was better than this! Why had God brought them out into the desert if they were only to die? They made these objections loud and clear.

By this point in the story, Moses wasn’t in the best of moods either, and the people’s complaints were getting on his ever-living nerve. “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” he snapped back.

In the book of Numbers, this same story from Exodus is repeated, but, in the Numbers version, Moses was even grumpier. “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” he shouted, before hitting the rock—perhaps a little too aggressively—and sending water shooting forth.

Who knows why Moses was so grouchy? Having no water seems like a legitimate complaint to me. Maybe he was thirsty too, and it made him irritable. Maybe he was annoyed that, after so many miracles, the people still didn’t trust God. Or maybe he was just tired of listening to complaints. What had they expected, fleeing from Egypt into the wilderness? A five-star hotel with a full service bar?

Then again, maybe grouchy Moses had his own secret stash of water—a private canteen reserved for the leadership—and so he just couldn’t relate to the suffering of his people. Whatever his reasons, Moses was fed up.

I mean, look at all the wonders God has done! And still they worry! Still they complain! Still they talk of Egypt as if their prison were a paradise compared to where God has taken them now. So little gratitude!

I wonder if there’s a lesson in that for me—an admonition not to get so worked up when I’m not getting what I want at the time I want it.

But, on second thought, I don’t actually know what it is like to be legitimately thirsty and without any foreseeable source of water. I’ve really never been without

a water source. Have you? Do you know what it’s like to begin to die of thirst and dehydration?

I do not, so I decided to look it up. This is a bit gruesome, but bear with me for a minute as I read the following description from Dr. David Stevens:

*As dehydration begins, there is extreme thirst, dry mouth and thick saliva. The patient becomes dizzy, faint and unable to stand or sit; has severe cramping in the arms and legs as the sodium and potassium concentrations in the body go up as fluids go down. In misery, the patient tries to cry but there are no tears. The patient experiences severe abdominal cramps, nausea and dry-heaving as the stomach and intestines dry out. By now the skin and lips are cracking and the tongue is swollen. The nose may bleed as the mucous membranes dry out and break down. The skin loses elasticity, thins and wrinkles. The hands and feet become cold as the remaining fluids in the circulatory system are shunted to the vital organs in an attempt to stay alive. The person stops urinating and has severe headaches as their brain shrinks from lack of fluids. The patient becomes anxious and gets progressively more lethargic. Some patients have hallucinations and seizures as their body chemistry becomes even more imbalanced.<sup>2</sup>*

It sounds terrifying to be truly thirsty. I don’t know exactly how thirsty God’s people were in the Exodus story, but since there were hundreds of them in a desert without a water source, I can imagine dehydration was a part of this story. There were elderly people for whom the journey would be tough, even with plenty of water. There were mothers who could not produce milk for their babies. There were toddlers calling for water, not able to understand why it was being withheld.

While looking at artwork through the centuries depicting the scene in Numbers where water pours forth from the rock, I was especially struck by a portion of a wall fresco from 1543 entitled “The Miracle of the Spring.”

I was captivated because the people are falling over themselves to get a drink. One man is flat on his stomach, head partially submerged, desperately gulping. Another man leans over, mouth gaping open like a baby bird.

A woman with a screaming baby on one hip leans forward with a small bowl, trying to squeeze in close enough to reach the water. People are pushing in with pitchers and containers. It is hard to tell if they are fighting one another for the water or helping carry water to those who cannot make it through the crowd.

I was struck by just how thirsty they were, and how primal thirst is. How without food or drink everything else becomes irrelevant.

Recently an official from the United Nations said the world is facing its largest humanitarian crisis in UN history. More than 20 million people across four countries in Africa and the Middle East are at risk of starvation and famine.<sup>3</sup>

I wanted to preach this sermon about spiritual thirst, about our longing for God, for assistance, for refreshment in times that feel so dry and desert-like. I wanted to talk about spiritual hunger and thirst because I have experience with that sort of aching. I know what it's like to thirst for God and to hunger for companionship, answers, and love.

What I do not know is what it is like to have no water and no bread. What I do not know is what it is like not to be able to feed my own children. What I do not know is what it is like to be so physically hungry and thirsty that it overwhelms everything else I could possibly care about.

Every day, you and I are living with tension because, in one sense, we are living through desert times in our country—a drought of kindness, of goodwill, of truth-telling and decency. And that drought is real and has real consequences for people's lives. Federal budget proposals are threatening to remove funding from programs that make sure people have food. The threat to those who hunger is close to home.

For some among us, the desert is closer still. In addition to the national problems, many of us face our own personal deserts of various sorts—health concerns, financial burdens, fractured relationships and terrible loss. Our droughts are real and have real consequences for our lives.

And then there is the literal drought most of us know nothing about. There is suffering and fear that is beyond our comprehension. Actual, physical starvation is a real and present threat for millions of people we may never even meet.

You and I live in this in-between space, where we are both the thirsty and the well fed. We are both the wanderer and the homesteader. We are both the comforted and the uncomfortable. The tendency is to try and live in one reality only, so that things don't feel so complicated. But that isn't an honest way to live.

The Hebrew people were the people God had miraculously provided for time and time again, AND they were the people without any water. They were the people God had liberated from slavery, AND they were the people stuck in the desert.

We are the people who come from this story and are acquainted with desert lands, AND we are the people who know nothing about what it is to truly thirst. We are people who have been enslaved by the chains of our addictions, our depression, our anxiety, our lust for wealth, our family trauma, AND we are the people who have never been Pharaoh's slaves, not to mention plantation slaves or sex slaves.

We are the people who lead with courage, AND we are the critics who make a sport of assigning blame and calling it a contribution. We are the people who care for the poor, AND we are the impoverished who chase empty wealth. We are people who gather at sumptuous tables to feast and feast again, and we are the people with broken

families and a divided nation who hunger and thirst for reconciliation.

Every day we live in the tension between our privilege and our pain. We're not always sure if we need delivering or whether we've already been delivered, whether we are in legitimate crisis or whether we are complaining about the small stuff.

We might wonder what we can learn from the Israelite journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness. But maybe this isn't a story about what to do or what not to do. Maybe it is just a story of what is. Maybe it's not a

*We might wonder what we can learn from the Israelite journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness. But maybe this isn't a story about what to do or what not to do.*

story about righteousness or the lack thereof; maybe it's a story about God's faithfulness. Maybe it's not a story about whether it is shameful to beg and to complain; maybe it is a story about a God who listens.

Maybe there isn't a moral to this story; maybe there isn't an "application." Maybe every Bible story we read isn't asking to be converted into a to-do list. Maybe some stories are there for companionship. Maybe some stories persist, not because they tell us how to live but because they give us hope. And what is life without hope?

These stories are our traveling companions, and they remind us it is okay to cry, and it is okay to complain. God doesn't stop listening just because your prayers sound like whines.

It is okay to ask questions, and it is okay to wonder whether the road to liberation is supposed to be this difficult. It is okay to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's need. It is okay to be angry. It is okay to hope. It is okay to ask for help, and it is okay to throw a party when the water arrives.

It is okay to rejoice in the present gifts of each moment even when the world is bleak and the future uncertain. It's okay to feel lost. It is okay to wonder where you're going and how to get there. It's okay for your heart to break when you see people suffer. It's okay for your heart to break when you suffer. Suffering isn't a competition, and it's okay to grieve your loss even though others have lost more.

It's okay to feel tired. It's okay to be happy, and it's okay to wonder if you should feel guilty for being happy when others feel the sky is falling. All this desert angst is normal, and it hasn't prompted God to abandon God's people yet.

There is always more work to be done. Always. And there will always be stories to tell and stories worth remembering. Sometimes the stories teach us how to live. Sometimes the stories keep us alive.

O God of desert sands and oasis springs, help us on our journey through strange terrain and uncharted territory. We are so grateful for your many provisions, your mercies which are new every day like the morning dew. We are amazed by our daily bread. AND. We are so very thirsty, Lord.

We carry around an ache in the belly that longs to be satisfied. Even when we are not thirsty, somewhere in the world your children are, and we do not understand in the slightest why you do not give them water. We wonder often if you are really there. Why are there not more rivers springing up in the desert?

O God of desert sands and oasis springs, hear our complaint. Turn your ear to the words of our groaning, and show forth your river-making power. Be our rock within a weary land. Be a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way. Care not only for us, but for all your children. Make us wellsprings of living water for everyone who thirsts. Let us be water. Let us be bread.

O God of famine and feast, of broken bread and poured out wine, write your story in our hearts. Write

your story in our hearts, we beseech you, O Lord, that we might not lose hope. Amen.

—Kyndall Rothaus is a preacher, poet, and storyteller. She is the Senior Pastor of Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. Kyndall is the co-founder of Nevertheless She Preached, a national, ecumenical preaching event designed and led by women. Her first book, Preacher Breath, was published by Smyth and Helwys in 2015.

### Editor's Notes

1. For people who are not completely up-to-date on contemporary communications, "hangry" means that you're irritable or bad-tempered because you're hungry.
2. This is from Dr. David Stevens, the Chief Executive Officer of Christian Medical & Dental Associations, the largest faith-based organization of healthcare professionals in the US.
3. See the award-winning article, "The Perfect Storm: How Aid Cuts, Drought & War Will Kill 20 Million People This Year—If We Don't Help," by Chelle Samaniego in *Hunger News & Hope*, Vol 17 No 1, Spring 2107, page one.

# A Prayer of Contrition and Supplication

by Deborah E. Harris

O God of Grace and Mercy,

We are a nation of all-you-can-eat buffets and fast foods.

We have forgotten what it is to eat what we need to be healthy, and to know when we have had enough.

Remind us of the morning manna in the desert, of simply gathering what is needed each day, and gratefully trusting in your provision for the next.

Disturb us at the thought of "haves" and "have-nots."

Help us to realize that a true feast is not defined by the quantity of food, but by the certainty that everyone—even our enemy—has a welcome place at the table.

Amen.

—Deborah Harris was a freelance writer and lyricist in Waco, TX. Until her death in 2016, she volunteered as the copy editor for *Seeds of Hope*. She also served as a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards.

art by Rebecca S. Ward

# Enough

## A Sermon about Miracles

by Raymond Bailey

Text: John 6:1-21

The word was out. Jesus was doing wonderful things. He was healing the sick, making whole those who needed it in so many different ways. And now he was going to feed the hungry. Multitudes gathered

*I finally said, "Slow down. Tell me what you are saying."  
He said, "I am the least of your brethren, and you have to help me."*

everywhere he went to see what he was going to do next and to have their own needs met.

Other accounts of this story give us a little different impression, a little different twist to the story. They seem to suggest that all these people came just to hear Jesus teach, and after Jesus taught all day, then the people became hungry, and Jesus had to feed them. But John's account tells us that the people *came* hungry. And those who had followed the brief career of the young healer would not have been surprised.

People often comment on the fact that Jesus did not do his ministry in Jerusalem, in the Holy City. He did not do it in the city where business was profitable, where people were employed, where people were doing well. He did it in Galilee.

Galilee was the poor part of the country. Galilee was that place to which many had fled and found themselves unable to find employment, unable to make a living in Jerusalem. It was a place where many people lived in poverty and, undoubtedly, where many

people were hungry. They were the unemployed, the underemployed, the underpaid population of their day.

We are sometimes critical of the audience, because we say that the people came for the wrong reason. They came because of the miracles. They did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the one to offer spiritual salvation, eternal life, hope in the life to come. They came because he was one who could meet their immediate needs.

"Spiritual" folks are critical of that. They wanted food when they should have wanted food for the spirit. They wanted their bellies filled. They wanted their wounds healed, their sicknesses cured. Why did they not see that the promise of the kingdom of heaven is more important?

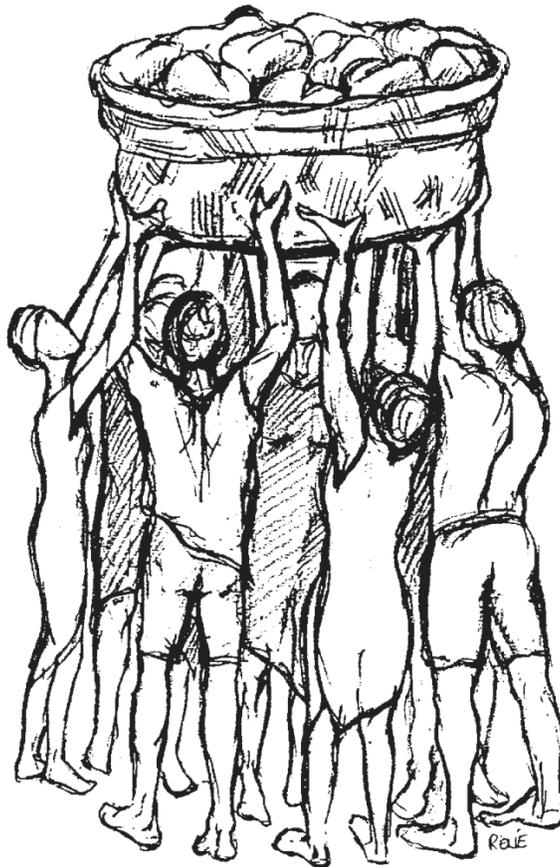
I once taught with a professor of evangelism who said, "If we just get their souls saved, then they will go to work, and they will not be hungry and they will not have any need." Indeed, I have to confess that sometimes

I have struggled with this a bit myself. The unseen soul is easier to treat than the broken body.

At one time I served a church in South Florida where the sanctuary was located at one end of the church campus, and my office was located at the other end. Every Sunday morning I had to make that long trek from my office to the sanctuary at the time to worship.

It was always a difficult few minutes, because, as I focused on what I was going to say in the pulpit, someone would stop me and say, "Do you know that the toilet in the women's restroom is broken?" I would say, "I will take care of it next week." Or, "You know, there is a light out up on the third floor." Another would say, "The nursery is not as clean as it ought to be. Could you speak to the custodian this week?"

And perhaps what was the most aggravating was the dirty,



art by René Boldt

unkempt person, looking for a handout, saying, "I am on the road. I am hungry. Preacher, can you help me?" He or she would say this, knowing how vulnerable I would be, on the way to the pulpit with my mind on the Bible, thinking about what Jesus had taught me.

There was one person in particular who lingers in my memory. The first three or four times he spoke to

*Is it not right that people who are hungry, that people who are hurting reach out to those of us who say that we are followers of Jesus Christ?*

me, I could not understand what he was talking about. He would start just as I came out of my office door. He followed me every step of the way, speaking over and over again, mumbling in a way that I could not understand. I finally said, "Slow down. Tell me what you are saying." He said, "I am the least of your brethren, and you have to help me."

Boy, that is arresting, is it not? He knew how that would affect me. "I am the least of your brethren, and you have to feed me."

Why does it trouble us that people come to the church to be fed, that they seek out the people who claim to represent the Christ?

In a former church office, we had, in two weeks, received more than 50 appeals for help of one kind or another: people who cannot pay their rent, cannot buy prescriptions, do not have grocery money, or have special needs of one sort or another. They call saying, "We have tried every other agency." For varying reasons, none of the public agencies could or would help.

We were only able to help six out of the 50 people who appealed to us. Our funds are limited. That is the sad part of it, is it not? Is it not appropriate that people in the world who have needs, whatever those needs may be—spiritual, physical, psychological needs—come to us for help?

Is it not right that people who are hungry, that people who are hurting reach out to those of us who say that we are followers of Jesus Christ?

"Give me what your Lord would have given me," they say. "Treat me as Jesus would have treated me. Care for me as your brother, because Jesus has said we are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ."

We have no trouble identifying with the irritated disciples. We know that the disciples were trying to protect Jesus out of their devotion to him, out of their desire to learn from him.

They wanted to keep people away who might bother Jesus. They tried to watch and to control who approached

Jesus. They tried to allow Jesus to determine who would come near him. I am sure that the disciples were upset that the multitudes were gathering, pushing each other, pushing on Jesus, pushing on them.

When Jesus turned to Philip and said, "These people are hungry. How are we going to feed them?" Philip said, "My goodness. We cannot feed them. There is not enough food. It would take six months' wages for us to feed them. We cannot possibly do it."

That is our word today, is it not? "I cannot feed all the hungry people. I do not want to see the hunger. I do not want to see the ugliness." We drive routes to avoid those parts of town that are an embarrassment to us and our city. We try to avoid looking upon those people who are suffering.

If we see a beggar on one side of the street, we cross the street and walk on the other side. We do not want to see it. We do not want to be involved in it. Maybe we are just following in the steps of the first followers of Jesus who said, "We cannot possibly do the job."

Jesus undoubtedly anticipated that. Jesus said, "Do what you can do. You can do these things. Gather them all together and tell them to sit down. You can do this. Find what there is and bring it to me." They brought the little boy, his fishes, his five loaves.

Think what a sacrifice was asked of the little boy. Maybe we do not think enough about that.

Philip had said, "It cannot be done." The little boy, as children often do, saw only the problem and the need, and he was willing to do whatever he could. Jesus said, "Give me your loaves and fishes." And the little boy said, "Here, Jesus. Use this."

How much better would the world be and how much more effective would be our evangelical outreach, how much more would the gospel be believed if we offered what we could, if we did what we could, if we said literally, "What I have is yours. Jesus, you can take what I have and use it. I trust you to use it wisely."

Jesus gave thanks and blessed it, and there was enough. There was plenty.

In spite of economic recovery in the past few years, the number of hungry in the world is still 795 million people—almost 8 million people—who are chronically malnourished. In the United States and around the world, one out of every eight living human beings is hungry. .

Many of them, of course, are children. In fact, three-fourths of them are children. Many of the children who will die this year will die of malnutrition or they will die of diseases that are brought about because of malnutrition. Since the economic crisis that began a decade ago, fewer people die from hunger, but more people struggle on the border of food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

But you say, "Oh, do not tell me about that. There is nothing I can do about that. What can I do?"

Jesus performed a miracle. Jesus used what was there. We have everything we need. The miracle in our case is

the miracle of natural resources, the miracle of technology, the miracle of modern science, the miracle of the human mind and the human ingenuity that God has given to us.

There is enough food to feed every hungry person in the world. The problem today is as it has always been—distribution. In the US alone, we could provide much of what is needed. It was estimated a few years ago that 3

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percent of the US defense budget would feed everyone in the world for one year.

We in the US still pay farmers not to grow food, because we have too much, and we want to control the economy. I have just finished reading a wonderful book by Jonathan Alter on the early days of the Franklin Roosevelt Administration. According to the author, one of FDR's greatest frustrations in the depression of the 1930s was that neither he nor anyone in his cabinet figured out a way to get the excess food to people who were hungry. So they paid people not to grow crops. They stored crops. They destroyed crops, and left people in America and around the world hungry.<sup>2</sup>

We still have not figured it out. We worry about how it is going to unbalance the economy. People can go to the moon—it has been almost 50 years since then. Neil Armstrong said, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." We can go to the moon and outer space. We can create a better mousetrap, a better automobile, a better weapon, but we cannot figure out how to distribute food to people.

Most of you are probably counting on a pretty good lunch. Some of you have a roast in the oven. Others of you have it laid out ready to go. Some of you are trying to decide in your own mind which restaurant you are going to today. Did you know that in one Big Mac there are 850 calories? That is more calories than many people around the world have for a whole day or even in a whole week. If you prefer Burger King, and you are really hungry, and if you have a double burger with cheese, that is 1,100 calories. That does not include French fries. That does not include a sugared drink.

No food. No nutrition. No resources. About 35 or 40 years ago, a preacher on the east side of New York City was constantly barraged by people coming to his church wanting help. The church was doing all they could to feed people. He realized that one church, one person could not do it all, but he did not give up. He did not say, like Philip, "We can't do anything about it. It is more than we can afford." He said, "What we need is a larger answer, a larger solution, a larger approach."

So, Arthur Simon founded Bread for the World. He recognized that, although churches everywhere were already raising money and collecting food to give to people, there also needed to be a lobby representing the poor and the hungry of the world to our government. He realized that changes in public policy were crucial to help people help themselves.

Jesus wants to work a miracle, a miracle through us. Miracles are sometimes just insights. Miracles are sometimes just what we do with something we already have. The earth does not have to shake. The sky does not have to open for a miracle to occur. It would be miraculous for people of any nation to become selfless enough to be willing to share enough to really work on this hunger problem. Enough. There is enough. Enough and more.

We would much rather talk about Jesus walking across the water, had we not, than Jesus feeding the multitude? There is not much chance that any of us is going to walk across a pond today, but there is a good chance that one of us is going to run into somebody who is hungry. We will not want to be inconvenienced by it. There is a good chance that we are going to have some challenge in our community, in our neighborhood, in our country, in our world.

Let Jesus Christ be seen in the feeding of hungry persons. The hardest part of the gospel is that we should follow in the way of Jesus. Later, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the disciples, "You will do greater things than I have done." Jesus said, "I only fed 5,000 men. How many will you feed? I have given you the wherewithal in the world. How will you use it?"

—Raymond Bailey is a retired pastor and homiletics professor living in Frankfort, KY. He taught at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, for many years, and then at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, TX. Among his numerous pastorates was his tenure at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, where he played a significant role for more than 15 years in the housing and support of the Seeds of Hope ministry.

## Endnotes

1. Sources: World Food Programme of the United Nations, "Where Are People Hungry?" Seeds of Hope Publishers website ([www.seedspublishers.org](http://www.seedspublishers.org))
2. *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks: 2007.

*There is not much chance that  
any of us is going to walk across  
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# A Cup of Cold Water

by Sharlande Sledge

Text: Matthew 10:40-42

*You can assume two things if you travel. At some point you will find yourself in a dire predicament — out of money, out of food, unable to find a hotel room, lost in a big city or on a remote trail, stranded in the middle of nowhere. The second is that someone will miraculously emerge to take care of you — to lend you money, feed you, get you something to drink, put you up for the night, lead you to where you want to go. Whatever the situation, dramatic or mundane, a stranger will come to your rescue.*

—Don George, *The Kindness of Strangers*

I remember being in a “dire predicament” in November 1994, on the most bitterly cold morning of my life. Upon exiting a crowded subway station in the center of Prague, I began looking up for the street signs and promptly tripped on the cobblestones. The next thing I knew I was on my knees, my mouth and nose were throbbing, and my lip profusely bleeding.

In a moment I changed from an adventurous tourist to a roadblock in the traffic pattern. I was hurt, frustrated with myself for falling and as far from home as I’d ever felt. As I tried to regain my balance and composure, people hurried past, some dropping tissues, a few bending over to ask me questions in Czech and moving on when they realized I could not answer them.

Finally, a kind presence bent down beside me. She,

too, spoke in Czech. Then German. When that didn’t work, she tried French. Then, with relief, I heard her say, “How can I help you?”

“I need some water and a telephone,” I told her. She helped me to my feet and led me back into the subway station to a restroom where I washed my face at the sink and got a rude glimpse in the mirror of the injuries to my face. She deposited her coins into a pay phone and dialed

*Today that Czech woman has taken on a mythical quality for me. When I was in a precarious, vulnerable place, she, a stranger, appeared out of nowhere and offered help.*

the Baptist seminary for me. She led me down the steep escalator of the station and accompanied me on the long subway ride back to the place where I had started my morning journey.

It wasn’t until we were sitting on a bench, waiting in the blustery 27-degree chill for a ride to the seminary, that I asked her to write her name and address on the back of my city map. “Do you live near here?” I asked. “No,” she said, “I just wanted to make sure that you got back safely.”

Today that Czech woman has taken on a mythical quality for me. When I was in a precarious, vulnerable place, she, a stranger, appeared out of nowhere and offered help. She was the kind presence in the winter coat and woolen gloves who entered my life when I was literally down and almost out. She tried different languages until one worked like a charm. Without promise of reward, she befriended someone she would probably never see again.

And yet nothing she did—talking to me, helping me to my feet, finding water and a phone, riding the subway, waiting on the bench—was beyond the reach of everyday kindness. The remarkable thing about the kind stranger was that she saw a person who needed what she could give and risked hospitality to me—a stranger.

Sometimes we forget how elegantly simple New Testament Christianity is.

Remember the words of Mother Teresa? “God does not call us to do great things but small things with great love.”



art by Peter Yuichi Clark

Small things...like pouring water from a pitcher into a plastic cup and handing it to the thirsty person in front of us.

Jesus gave instructions to his disciples when they set off on their journeys. He knew that every small, of-the-moment gesture mattered within the larger context of his mission. After all, they were leaving for places they had never been (no familiar landmarks or street signs along the way). They might find themselves in dire predicaments. They risked hostility. The message they carried was not welcomed by everyone.

*Through the church, those who were not admitted into other segments of society in the ancient world were given a cup of cold water, invited in, and offered hospitality at the table.*

"You'll be dependent upon the hospitality of strangers," Jesus told them. "You can't get from point A to point B without it. You can't pass through the desert without help. You can't travel down the road without protection from robbers. You can't get water for your animals except for the generosity of a stranger. You can't sleep under a roof or in a tent without being welcomed inside."

So embrace the culture of hospitality. Your lives are intertwined with the lives of others. Depend on the hospitality of others, and others will depend on you. Stay where you're invited to stay. Accept the help of others, and give help, too, as you are able.

Listen to how *The Message* puts it:

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice.*

The first disciples took Jesus' instructions to heart and left their mark on the way the church grew.

The world was stunned when it saw the way the first Christian community lived. The church was doing what Jesus asked the disciples to do when they were back in Galilee: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, extending compassion to the dying, doing the unthinkable, giving cups of cold water to the thirsty, touching the untouchable, rescuing unwanted and abandoned children from the streets of Rome and caring for them—welcoming each person into God's presence.

By the second century, ancient hospitality was being transformed by the Christian community who was already breaking out of the old structures of tribe, clan and race to extend the love of Jesus Christ. The citizens of Rome despised and persecuted the Christians. Tertullian wrote this to them:

*We are your brothers and sisters too. What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is the practice of loving kindness. "Only look," they say, "[see] how they love one another."<sup>1</sup>*

No one had ever said anything like that about a group of people before: in essence, "We are one. We are, all of us, children of one God."

Tertullian's words survived the centuries, even inspiring the line in the popular hymn: "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Princeton's Elaine Pagels says, "Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social situation based on the value and dignity of every human being."<sup>2</sup>

Through the church, those who were not admitted into other segments of society in the ancient world were given a cup of cold water, invited in, and offered hospitality at the table. This welcome became a signature feature of those burgeoning communities of faith—a sign of the transforming love and power of God in this world.

God's very character and nature is that of welcome and hospitality—wide and open, without boundary or barrier. Welcoming the stranger, offering generosity, practicing hospitality were not casual matters; they were of God. They revealed and manifested God's presence.

Marjorie Thompson says,

*Our hospitality is rooted and grounded in God's hospitality to us in Christ. Until we know this love deep in the core of our hearts, we will have neither the courage nor the trust to share hospitality with others.*

And Parker Palmer "amens" what she says:

*We welcome the stranger best not by focusing on the strangers in our midst but by focusing on God, and letting God stand in our midst as the one who offers hospitality.*

I have a bookmark with a quote by Plato that I wish I could remember in the presence of every friend and stranger: "Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Jesus calls us to meet everyone fighting a hard battle with a cup of grace—that may be poured out little by little in a spirit of acceptance, or in loving words, or in gracious silence, or in space to be at home, or in a welcome where there has been no welcome.

Or in a literal cup of cold water.

The image transcends all times and places, from the United Parcel Service (UPS) driver who has come by the church several times this hot and humid week and each time asks for water from the kitchen...to the full glass you drink with your medicine...to bottles shipped to the site of a hurricane...to the water the woman offered Jesus at the well. The giving of a cup of cold water is amazingly concrete, tangible, and visible.

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty.<sup>3</sup>*

I find great hope in these words, don't you? Sometimes we have the chance to dig a well in Ghana or Ethiopia, but we're not called to feed and give water to the whole world all the time, all by ourselves. We do it one person at a time. One cup at a time.

One cup of water, given in Christ's name, is a complete gift.

Sometimes the gesture is so small you can barely see it. But then, in time, giving away cup after cup of cold water can grow into patterns and practices of generosity, inclusion and welcome that can change and build people's

Sometimes the gesture is so small you can barely see it. But then, in time, giving away cup after cup of cold water can grow into patterns and practices of generosity, inclusion and welcome that can change and build people's lives.

lives. Added to the cups of water others give, these practices can change a congregation.

The Church of the Holy Apostles, an Episcopal congregation in lower Manhattan, is a New York landmark, a beautiful sanctuary with a high arched cathedral ceiling and gorgeous stained glass windows. Over the years, the congregation slowly dwindled in size, until the 200 or so members simply couldn't afford to pay the bills and keep it open. A new rector suggested to the congregation that "if Holy Apostles is going out of business, it might as well do some good before it does."

So, in October of 1982, they launched a free-lunch program in their Mission House. Thirty-five homeless people came. The program grew. Other people became interested and started to give money. By the mid-1980s, they were serving 900 lunches daily and bursting the seams of the Mission House.

And then, in 1990, during roof repairs to the main sanctuary, a fire broke out. Damage to the roof and windows was extensive. There was adequate insurance, and during the restoration, while the pews were out, they came up with an idea: why not leave the pews out and use the large worship space, which was essentially empty and unused Monday through Friday, for other ministries? (That is not unlike what we as a church did years ago.<sup>4</sup>)

And that is what they did. They auctioned off the pews, and every day set up round tables to feed the hungry. Now, in their sanctuary, they are serving 1,200 meals a day.

I love the logistics. Volunteers put up the tables and chairs for 1,200 and do most of the cleaning and serving. The rules are simple: no overt proselytizing, and no one is turned away. You get a ticket in the Mission House,

enter the sanctuary to eat, and if you're still hungry, go outside, stand in line, get another ticket, and eat again.

Writing about Holy Apostles for *The New Yorker*, Ian Frazier asked Associate Rector Elizabeth Maxwell about the specific religious inspiration and motivation for the program. She said:

*Well, we do this because Jesus said to feed the hungry. There's no more to it than that. Jesus told us to take care of the poor and hungry and thirsty and those in prison. He said, "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." In all the intricacies of scriptural interpretation, that message—feed the hungry [welcome the stranger]—could not be more clear. Those of us at Holy Apostles feel we have a Sunday-Monday connection. The bread and wine of the Eucharist we share on Sunday becomes the food we share with our neighbors during the week.... We believe that our job as Christians is to meet Jesus in the world. We meet him, unnamed and unrecognized, in the guests who come to the soup kitchen every day.*

What Jesus makes clear is that such hospitality engages you, not only with your neighbor, but also with God. When you welcome the stranger, you welcome the divine presence. When you offer as simple a gift as a cup of water to one of the least in your midst, God is present. Even the smallest act of hospitality is an occasion to welcome God.

In the late 1990s, I was driving home from Rockport, TX, when traffic came to an abrupt halt near Hallettsville because of a horrific wreck. I saw a firefighter pulling a terrified little boy out of one of the crushed vehicles and set him by the side of the road, alone. I walked toward the scene and knelt down by six-year-old Cody.

"Can you tell me what you need?" I asked him.

"Some Kleenex," he said, "and some water."

Nothing demanding. Nothing, at the moment, beyond the basics. Nothing beyond what any of us would need. Some Kleenex. Some water. And some kindness.

May we give, may we receive in Christ's name.

—Sharlande Sledge has been the associate pastor at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX, for more than 30 years. Her book, *Prayers & Litanies for the Christian Seasons*, was published in 1999 by Smyth & Helyws Publishing, Inc. Many of her prayers and musings have graced the pages of *Seeds of Hope* publications over the years.

## Endnotes

1. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 9–10.
2. Ibid.
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.
4. Several decades ago, the congregation at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco decided to take out the pews in its sanctuary and use folding chairs for worship, so that the large room could be used in many different ways.
5. Ian Frazier, "Hungry Minds: Tales from a Chelsea Soup Kitchen," *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2008.

# Benediction



## So let us live in hope

and begin to make the victory celebration happen  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Let us grieve, with hope that a day is coming  
when these tears will be wiped away  
and there will be an end to the pain and suffering.  
Let us live in hope that one day we will indeed learn  
to live and party together  
in ways that build up and don't tear down.

We will trust each other completely  
because we will know even as we are fully known.  
We will stand in awe of something far greater than any of us.  
We will feast fully as brothers and sisters at God's table  
and, as we break bread together on this side of the celebration,  
we claim its presence on the mountain of God  
and right here on God's earth among us.

This is our mountain.

May we learn to live and grieve and love  
like those who are on their way to an amazing party.

The table is set, the wine is poured.  
Let us continue on the journey together.

Amen.

—Erin Conaway

*—Erin Conaway is pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds offices are hosted. Besides being generous with his writings, he supports Seeds fundraising efforts—which sometimes includes staying up all night smoking barbeque.*

*The art on this page is by Andy Loving, one of the original Seeds editors, and appeared on the cover of Seeds Magazine during its inaugural year.*