Speaking of Hunger...
Speaking of Hunger
Sermons of Challenge and Hope

contents:

3 Introduction: Preaching about Hunger: Good News for the Hungry and the Full
by Raymond Bailey

7 More Than All You Can Ask or Imagine
by Joy Jordan-Lake

11 Counting Calories in a Starving World
by Brett Younger

14 Knowing Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread
by Clyde Tilley

17 What It Means to Worship
by Ashlee Wiest-Laird

19 The Eating Habits of Jesus
by Richard Groves

22 Storing Grain and Starving People
by Brett Younger

25 Do the Right Thing
by Raymond Bailey

28 What! Does the Lord Require?
by Larry Bethune

32 At Ease in Zion? What It Means to Be God’s People
by Lynn Tatum

a word about this resource

This collection of sermons is sponsored by the Alliance of Baptists (AOB) and produced by Seeds of Hope. For a number of years, Christian leaders in the anti-hunger movement have been calling for a cache of sermons about hunger. This year the AOB has enabled Seeds to pull together this collection. Most of the sermons are from the last eight years of Sacred Seasons, a quarterly Seeds worship resource. Some are being published for the first time. We have added some art and quotes as well.

The materials in this packet are gifts from ministers, writers, and artists who believe strongly in our quest to help congregations to regularly incorporate hunger and justice issues into their worship. We hope you are inspired, challenged, disturbed, and encouraged by them.

Sacred Seasons logo by Sharon Rollins,
Seeds of Hope logo by Erin Kennedy Mayer
Jesus' first sermon set the tone for his entire ministry. His choice of text indicated something about his own sense of mission and about the continuity between the old and new covenants. Luke records Jesus' return from the desert and a personal experience of hunger as a prelude to the sermon at Nazareth. The physician tells us that Jesus, having faced the illusions of, Satan about power in the world, incensed his neighbors? Jesus applied this text of grace to those outside Israel. His illustrations included examples in Sidon and Syria, countries and peoples despised by Israelites.

How like our own day this is! There are growing numbers of United States citizens, most of whom claim to be followers of Jesus, who want to deny the most basic benefits tainted as “welfare” to those born in other nations whom they view, as the Jews did Gentiles, as intruders. The anti-immigrant movement in the United States manifests the spirit of those who drove Jesus from his home “church” and his hometown.

Study after study demonstrates a willingness of people to help those who are most like them. The US Congress, with overwhelming public approval, moves rapidly to help middle and upper-class victims of floods, tornadoes, and other disasters. Support comes from those most critical of helping the victims of economic and social cycles. Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor and release of the captives. Too many today want to just help “our own kind.”

The call to feed the hungry is also good news to the rich. Jesus often warned of the curse of greed and wealth. The rich man and Lazarus, the postscript to the account of the rich young ruler, the judgment scene in Matthew 25, and the parable of the farmer who wasted his life building new barns are just a few of Jesus' warnings.

Gordon Cosby says that God has called him to relieve the wealthy of the burden of their money. Such ideas are not original with contemporary reformers. Selfishness and indifference to the poor were popular themes in the writings of the early leaders of the church. St. Basil wrote: “Aren't you a miser, a plunderer, when you use for your own benefit something which has been given to you to be administered?…The bread which you keep for yourself although you do not need it belongs to the hungry…You commit as many injustices as there are people with whom you avoid sharing what you have.”

John Calvin was not restrained in his attack on the grain combine of his day; he called them "murderers, savage beasts, biting and eating the poor, sucking in their blood." He warned those in his congregation that "those who have riches, whether inherited or won by their own industry and labour, are to remember that what is left over is not meant for intemperance or luxury, but for relieving the needs of the brethren.”

Subjects like hunger, violence, war, and peace are too often reserved for special occasions.
Money that is given to feed hungry people is a twofold blessing, for giver and receiver are equally blessed. The conscientious pastor will address the needs of folks to give as much or more than the physical needs of the impoverished.

The original offerings in the church were to feed the hungry. This was an extension of the best of Jewish heritage with its emphasis on forgiveness of debts, land redistribution and grain left in the fields for the poor. Providing for those in need was a jubilee experience. The offerings received in early Christian worship were to care for the poor. Paul's fund drives for impoverished Christians are well documented in the correspondence to the Corinthians. Christian tradition provides ample evidence of philanthropy in the mission of God's people.

Above I alluded to the popular attitude, “Let’s take care of our own” or “Charity begins at home.” Most of our giving is more ego-centered than that. The great majority of religious giving in this country is for the purpose of sustaining institutions. We, like the man Jesus told about in Luke 12, tear down our spiritual barns and build bigger ones. The support of staffs who serve us and programs that serve us is the primary purpose of revenue growth in American Christian churches.

Musical instruments are purchased sometimes for use once a year or less. When preaching sacrifice on behalf of the hungry, be prepared to experience the rejection Jesus experienced when one went away because he had great riches. (Mk. 10:17-31; Matt. 19:16-20:16; Lk. 18:18-30) Before preaching on social issues, the preacher should examine his or her role in creating or encouraging such attitudes.

The painful question is how may sermons on social themes be diluted by personal and institutional lifestyles. Hosea noted that social conditions often reflect a situation where it is “like people, like priest.” (Hosea 4:9) Grand words about the obligation of Christians to feed the hungry will be meaningless unless supported by a lifestyle of respect and concern for those in need.

Preaching on particular issues or for special occasions should reflect something of a systematic personal theology. The interpretation of isolated texts should be informed by one's understanding of God and the overall biblical message. I would suggest three aspects of theology particularly relevant to the subject of hunger and Christian responsibility: stewardship, anthropology, and justice/righteousness.

We sing “this is my father’s (mother’s) world.” Do we believe it? If we do believe it, what difference does it make in our decisions about the use of natural and human resources? A stated religious proposition that is not a guiding principle for living is blasphemy. God created the world and gave humanity the privilege and responsibility for it. The world has been entrusted to us, and we are accountable for how we treat it.

The term “steward” is found in only two places in the gospels. (Lk. 12:41-48 and Lk. 16:1-13) In both instances it is a part of a story of unfaithfulness and judgment. As private managers and public magistrates, stewards were persons charged with the control of property and the care of persons. Stewards were not just to observe passively their domains, they were to develop them. The fact is that God gave to humankind “dominion.” (Gen. 1:26) The environment is to be managed in such a way to serve God's purpose in creation.

The problem of hunger is one of political and economic circumstances—circumstances over which humans exercise control. Natural resources are not just for our comfort and enjoyment but for our development. Never has a famine covered the whole earth. The problem is one of distribution. These are theological as well as social realities to which there is usually great resistance. The experts tell us that fifty percent of the world's wealth is controlled by six percent of the world's population, those dwelling in the United States.

Begin with the Bible and God's mandate of stewardship, and then use demographic data available through such publications as Seeds to give evidence of our sins of commission and omission.

Nelson Mandela has observed that “our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” It may not be what we do with our weakness but what we fail to do with our power that embarrasses us the most when we stand before God. Luke said that Jesus came in the power of the Spirit. Christian theology acknowledges that God has given us responsibility for God’s world and the power to do the job.

Human beings are a part of God's creation. Certainly we should care for the environment, but only women and men are said to be created in God's own image. (Gen. 1:27) The scriptures teach that all people share a common divine heritage. The value of human life is the highest value in God's economy. The psalmist depicts the grandeur of God climaxed in the creature made “a little less than God...with glory and honor...with dominion over the works of thy hands.” (Ps. 8:5-6)

The care of persons is the primary task of the church. Time and again the Bible makes it clear that such care includes bodily needs. (see Isaiah 58:6-12; Amos 4:1, 5:11-12; Matt. 25:31-46; James 1:27, 2:15-16) “Who is my...
neighbor?” was a favorite question of the rich and middle-class of Jesus’ day and is repeated in many forms today by the same classes, perhaps for the same reasons.

Theology is about the existence, meaning, and presence of God. As Jon Sobrino says,

Theology becomes responsible in that it responds to the real world. Theology becomes practical because its motivating concern is not pure thought nor even pure truth but rather the building of the Kingdom of God and of a church that will be at the service of this kingdom.4

The great frustration that many feel listening to sermons on social problems is the absence of hope or a plan of action for resolution. People may leave a hunger emphasis service feeling guilty, sad, and hopeless, thinking “so what?”

Justice is the end of God’s presence in the world. Jesus as God among us called for social transformation of the most radical kind. The course of history was retargeted according to the original purpose of God in creation. Sobrino contends that justice is a form of love and as such is essential to the gospel message. “Justice takes seriously the primordial fact of the created world in its given form....”5

The interruption and distortion of creation produced injustice. Injustice is the result of sin, of a world and time out of joint. Justice in simplest terms is right relationship; all things and persons in right relationship to God. Paul’s natural theology in Romans most clearly states the situation. Chapters One and Two reflect on how the world became a realm of injustice.

The whole system is being reordered. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:19-21) The world remains out of joint until all of God’s children are filled with the bounty of God’s world.

Let us now turn to some practical suggestions for preaching about hunger. Subjects like hunger, violence, war, and peace are too often reserved for special occasions. Certainly it is good to have special emphasis Sundays in which appeals for food, money, or political action can be the singular focus. This is not enough, however, for a problem of such magnitude. The need and the opportunity for ministry should be kept before the church.

I would like to propose a philosophy of campaign preaching. Do not try to do it all in one sermon. Plan a series that will lay a foundation and build upon it. False notions have to be challenged, problems exposed, solutions offered and tested, and hopefully consensus for action established.

A pastor might begin with a sermon on creation, follow with one on the uniqueness of humanity, deal with the fall, then Cain and Abel and separation, etc., and end up with the responsibilities we have to one another as a part of a single global family.

Sermons on different topics may offer opportunity for subpoints on injustice, poverty or hunger, or illustrations that raise consciousness of human suffering. An evangelical sermon might well note that God is interested in the redemption and healing of the whole person.

Congregations should not be allowed to drop a few extra bucks in the plate on a special Sunday or suffer a meal of rice and beans and then think, “Well, that’s over for another year.” Critical topics should be kept before them. Follow the biblical model and note the frequency with which obligation to the poor recurs.

Particular sermons should have particular behavior goals. The preacher should ask, “What is it that I want to happen as a result of this sermon?” It is easier to describe problems than it is to prescribe solutions. Too many sermons spend 95 percent of the preaching time on picturing the problem and then conclude with a weak appeal for concern and prayer.

The great frustration which many feel listening to sermons on social problems is the absence of hope or a plan of action for resolution. People may leave a hunger emphasis service feeling guilty, sad, and hopeless, thinking “so what?” An effective sermon on hunger will offer concrete suggestions for action. The people want to hear how they can make a difference.

A proven technique for organizing persuasive sermons is that called the Monroe Motivated Sequence. Monroe offered a five-step formula: (1) the Attention Step, (2) the Need Step, (3) the Satisfaction Step, (4) the Visualization Step, and (5) the Action Step.6 This formula is audience-centered. The audience must be made aware of the problem and how it affects them. They then must be told how they can do something about it and helped to visualize themselves actually being a part of the solution.

Illustrations are the key to effective preaching on any subject. They help to link the familiar with the unfamiliar, to grasp the concrete, and to identify with actors in a particular scene of the human drama. Illustrations should be believable, have an air of the familiar, and reflect the life experience and values of the listeners.

Good illustrations have strong sensory appeal. Let the congregation see, hear, taste, and touch what the hungry
person experiences. The greatest impact of an illustration is most likely in proportion to the ability of the audience to identify. Empathy is a stronger appeal than sympathy. Reduce cosmic evil to everyday life experience. Take the staggering statistics of the effects of starvation and compare it to the headlines of today’s newscast.

The whole nation was appropriately shocked, outraged, and filled with sorrow at the deaths of 235 persons in a recent plane disaster. Compare that figure to a day’s kill because of indifference to starving children—and that is something we can do something about.

Frederick Buechner recently addressed the challenge we face:

_Hunger in the literal sense is unknown to you and me. In a world where thousands starve to death every day, we live surrounded by plenty. We watch with full bellies the TV footage of Third World children with their bellies swollen, their legs and arms like sticks, the eyes vacant in their ancient faces, and may God have mercy on us as a nation, as a civilization, as whatever it means to call us Christendom, if we do not find some way to wipe their hunger from the face of the earth._

Let us join our voices with the prophets and Jesus in crying out against injustice and for the care of persons.

—Raymond Bailey, who taught homiletics in Louisville, Kentucky, for 16 years, is now a pastor in Waco, Texas. He says he would sometimes show the last five minutes of the movie Romero to his preaching students and tell them, “This is what happens when you preach the gospel.” This article has been printed in Sacred Seasons, Hunger Emphasis 1998, and also in “Developing a Heart for the Hungry: A Hunger Primer for Beginning Churches,” a resource packet produced for the Seeds of Hope web site in 2005.

**endnotes**

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid, p. 50.

They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations....

—Ezekiel 34:28–29

art by Sharon Rollins
More Than All You Can Ask or Imagine

a sermon by Joy Jordan-Lake

John 6:1-21; 2 Kings 4:38-44; Ephesians 3:14-21

O ur texts today cover John's story of the feeding of the five thousand, Elisha's feeding of one hundred people, and a prayer for the church's maturity. I wonder: What does the love of God in Christ Jesus have to do with dry barley loaves—the bread of poor, common people? And what does Jesus have to do with a pithy, rather peculiar story about an Old Testament prophet?

Now, I know YOU were paying attention to the gorgeously executed readings of Scripture this morning, but in case the mind of the person next to you took a little trip to South Padre for a moment, let me just highlight what YOU, already, quite cleverly, no doubt have noticed.

The gospel account of Jesus' feeding the multitudes seems strangely related somehow to the Old Testament account of Elisha's performing some sort of similar barley bread-related feat, only on a very small scale. Elisha simply has lots more people present than he can feed with twenty loaves of bread, but somehow, in the end, there's plenty, with lots leftover.

I'm even enough of an irreverent renegade to read this passage and think, “Come on—Elisha just sliced the loaves a little thinner.” As miracles go, the Elisha passage doesn't even show up on the same chart with the sea-parting/dead-raising/pillar-of-fire kind of thing. Still, the point of the story seems to be something to do with God supplying more than the demand. Much more.

This is not unlike the story of Jesus and the very hungry crowd on the hill. Listen with me between the lines of the story, how the apostles bring the boy with the little blanket, or the basket of food, to Jesus. Jesus examines the crowd, peers down at the couple of tiny, dried fish and five poor-people rolls and says, “Sure, that'll do just fine.”

The apostles say, “But, um, rabbi, sir, there are maybe five thousand men, HUNGRY ones, hanging out here to hear you!”

Jesus looks back at the crowd and says, “No, I'd say twenty thousand people or so, if you count the women and children—and I do. Guess we'll have to make the meal stretch a bit, huh, boys?”

I wonder what types of people were standing there listening, watching this Jesus guy announce that he'd be feeding a whole stadium crowd with what amounts to a Weight Watcher's frozen dinner. I'm guessing there were a few folks like you there, a few like me, a few like the ones you and I admire and despise.

There was an Eye Roller for sure—every crowd has one. She takes one look at the boy and barley and bazillion people and says, “Right. WhatEVER” and rolls her eyes so big her whole head rocks back.

And there's an Analyst, stepping forward to suggest that someone first commission a survey to see if there is, in fact, a FELT need on the part of the crowd, and how that felt need, if present, might manifest itself according to age, gender and socio-economic breakdown, and perhaps current zip code. Only then, would it be prudent to proceed.

And there's surely an Eeyore present too—there always is—watching it all and groaning, “We shouldn't have come. Too many people. Too little food. There'll be a riot. We'll all be killed. And when we're killed, then you'll agree that we shouldn't have come.”
Those of us who listen too closely to all those kinds of voices in our own world—the Eye Rollers and the Analysts and the Eeyores—can let them divert us from our dreams of what God might, just maybe, do through us.

Our passage in Ephesians tells us of a power at work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. But those voices around us can make us pinch our prayers into dishonest, safe little words we don’t even mean and intimidate us from being willing to just unfurl our fingers and give what we have and who we are to God—no matter how much or how little that is.

No surprise that the one who offers such a pathetic, measly meal of fish and rolls to feed a mob is a child. Those of us older than seven would be too embarrassed, wouldn’t we? Too self-conscious that people were watching. And what would they say?

Or we’d be too selfish. Didn’t we, in fact, earn what we’ve got—and got it the hard way, thank you? Deserve to keep it, too.

Maybe you’ve heard the statistic that our world easily produces 2,805 calories per day for every man, woman, and child on earth. Yet, every day, 27,000 die of starvation and other preventable causes—three quarters of them children. Why?

Maybe because some of us are hoarding our talent, our skills, and our financial resources. Some of us are hoarding, holding on too tightly to what we have, who we are, because we’re too blasted self-focused. But maybe, too, some of us are scared: we don’t feel we have much in our baskets to offer—what measly talent I have, so few skills, so little savings…what good is this little to anyone, least of all God?

Self-focused or just embarrassed and scared, we end up cowering in the cockpit like the disciples at sea. But this little boy, in that wonderful way children have of not knowing the impossible from the possible, sees that Jesus intends to feed all this ravenous crowd with just two little fish and five barley rolls and the boys goes, “COOL. Here ya go.”

Here’s the thing, though: he has to let go of those loaves. He has to free up those fish in order to do anybody any good outside himself. But then, when he does, doggonit if the strangest thing doesn’t happen.

Jesus blesses it, and passes it to the disciples, who act as the waiters and bus boys, and when it’s time to pick up the pieces, there are not one, not two, but TWELVE baskets of bread left over. And to let us know that there’s nothing wrong with the Divine Spreadsheet at work, you’ll notice there’s no mention of leftover fish that would rot in a molten Middle Eastern sun.

So apparently the twelve baskets are there for some purpose, overflowing their rims as the disciples stumble back to the front. And you have to laugh at these guys, staring cross-eyed from the boy who’d had the five barley loaves to these stockpiles of bread climbing clear up to their schnozzes, and they’re going, “I have GOT to cut back on the tequila shots before noon.”

I’m guessing Jesus is over here with the boy who’d delivered over his dinner, and they’re exchanging a wink. Which is what this story is about, isn’t it? An answer to a need, along with a laugh, and a wink. An abundance no one saw coming, excess nobody earned, some kind of surplus from God you couldn’t spend up if you tried.

Any of us who’ve attempted the practice of prayer for any length of time have discovered that, as Ann Lamott likes to imagine it, no prayer stays in God’s in-box forever. Eventually, it may come back a big “NOPE.” Or it might be, “You’ll have to go step-by-step on this one.”

But sometimes, have you ever had those answers, maybe to one single prayer or maybe a whole season, that come back, as in this story, like billows and billows of bread rolling in, more than you ever asked for, more than you ever imagined?


Twelve baskets of barley bread so full they’re tumping sideways seem to say something about a God who is All About the Impossible. Isn’t that the OUTRAGE of the old, old story, after all? The geriatric pregnancies. The lone shepherd boy with the sling shot who with one stone takes out Goliath, the Philistines’ major weapon of mass destruction. Prostitutes who get featured in the royal pedigreed. Seas that part on cue.

It’s impossible, it’s over the top, it’s what this God is about.

One of the lessons on loaves in my own life happened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, over the course of several years. It began when I arrived, fresh from seminary and the sunny South, looked around my New England home and realized for all greater Boston’s sophisticated networking of social services, most of the soup kitchens were rough and rowdy places: one stood an excellent chance of being threatened,
struck or propositioned—or all of the above—sometime during the course of the meal.

There weren’t many calm, safe places that a woman alone or families with children could go to get warm, feel cared for, and come away, all in one piece, with free groceries. Enter Recent Seminary Graduate to save the day. I called a meeting in my church for anyone interested in helping to start a clothes closet and food pantry for women and families. This was gonna be great!

Two people showed up.

We had no food, no clothes to offer—and no funding. And no space—our Spanish-speaking sister congregation opposed using the church building to hand out food—might attract the wrong element. But we collected cash and canned food and khakis and down coats from our congregation, and tunneled out a portion of the church basement that had been used since the 19th century for trash and coal dust—surely no one could object to our using that.

We papered the city with flyers announcing our opening day—Da Da Da Da—and we waited for the grateful masses to arrive.

November 17, 1989, ten o’clock. We opened our doors. Hello, hungry and hurting world: help is on its way.

No one was there. Thirty minutes went by, then an hour. Then, at last, our first client. And she had, yes, a baby stroller. Just the target group we were seeking to serve! She approached, stumbling through the driving snow. We reached to help lift the stroller up the steps and lean in to coo in the sweet little one’s face. It was a stuffed Garfield doll—who was, it seemed, very much alive to our client, who tickled him under the chin.

It was winter in Boston, we had only two warm baby outfits on our shelves, and this woman wanted them both for Baby Garfield—and way more of our food, if you ask me, than one person needed for a week. The transaction did not go well. By the time she left, Garfield’s mother had promised to have her partner come after me with a knife. This was our only client of the day.

I’d been out to feed the world—or at least greater Boston—and instead I was going to be stalked in dark alleys by Garfield’s mother’s lover.

It was a terrible flop. I was a terrible flop.

I went home, and I’d like to say that I prayed, but I think the “prayer” consisted more of my telling God, “I’m done. You can have New England’s finest clothes closet/food pantry. I’m outta here.”

I proceeded to home-perm my hair. Men in ministry don’t have this option for drowning their sorrows in perm solution, and it’s a shame, really. You should know it was a $6.99 drugstore perm, and I could already smell it beginning to burn after 10 minutes. When the phone rang, I’d have ignored the caller, but the voice on the answering machine was our church treasurer, Laura, who said we had to talk right away. I picked up, fully intending to keep an eye on the clock in order to wash out my hair in two minutes, no more.

Laura had just received through the mail a cashier’s check from a local bank with a note from an anonymous someone in the community saying that this was to be used for Cambridgeport’s new clothes closet/food pantry. It was for $1,000.

And, Laura said, we’d received a letter from Project Bread saying they’d not only accepted our grant application for several thousand dollars, but they were giving us emergency funding in the meantime: another check for $1,000.

In all the excitement, a good 30 to 45 minutes went by. [Sniff, Sniff.] Uh-Oh. My hair.

It took about four years for 15 inches of fuzz to grow out, but it served as a VIVID reminder: “Oh, me of little faith.”

In the following weeks at the clothes and food pantry, clients began to pour in, sometimes 80 low-income and homeless families per two-hour period. But just when I’d despair of enough volunteers a whole Bible study group would show up, unannounced from MIT or Boston U. Or some neighbors from down the street who would never set foot in a church sanctuary, found they liked helping out in a church basement.

Clothing donations poured in—nice clothes, great stuff—so much we didn’t have enough room on the shelves. So we asked a local store to donate some hanging racks. One or two, they grudgingly said. But when I arrived to pick them up with two deacons, local boys who’d been big into drugs and petty crime back in high school, the store manager, who’d gone to school with these guys was so flabbergasted that Pete and Jay, the old hoodlums, were there to help the poor and not rip off her store, she insisted we take more racks—and racks and racks…until the vehicle we’d brought overflowed.

The clothes, the beautiful clothes, kept coming in: business suits and silk blouses, so many we didn’t have time to get them all on the shelves or the racks. And the clients, the beautiful clients, from Haiti and Dominican Republic,
Brazil and El Salvador, kept coming. Most spoke not one word of English.

And just when I’d begun to despair of that, a group from Wellesley announced that they could use a school van to drive to Sunday worship if they would perform some social service, so could they please work in the clothes closet early Sunday mornings before worship? One of the Wellesley women was a linguistics major, and would like to come, she said on Saturday mornings too—if that was okay. She was fluent in French and Spanish and Portuguese; someone else knew Haitian Creole. “Yeah,” I said, “that would be okay.”

Now Laura, the church treasurer, had an MBA from Harvard, and knew me in particular and humanities types in general well enough to know that most of us still aren’t real clear on long division. She had to explain to me that in end-of-the-year non-profit accounting one wants to spend all the money one has, to show one needs all that, in order to procure more. A zero balance is a good thing, she assured me. Grant givers don’t like a surplus.

So each year I suppressed my fiscal uptightness, and set my sights on zero. And each year, just as I was about to triumph, the very weekend before our budget meeting, there’d be trouble. One year I was approaching a nice, clean zero balance for the meeting in a few days, when Polaroid executives showed up and asked for a tour of the pantry. We have a favor to ask, they said. We need to show community service, could you accept this small check? It was for $1,000.

The next year, having had a surplus, I knew not to expect much. But Boston’s annual Walk for Hunger fell on a sunny day, 40,000 people walked, and in our annual grant there appeared an additional, unsolicited check—for $1,000. One year, despite our giving away literally a ton of food each week, we faced yet another small budget surplus.

The weekend before the annual budget summit, an elderly parishioner came to the pantry and handed me a hat and some mittens. “The Bible says if you have two coats,” she said, “give one away. I’ve got only one coat but two pairs of these.”

Ah-Hah! That was IT. I could buy boatloads of hats and mittens! People newly arrived from Haiti could use that, and it would spend that surplus. A volunteer loading bags behind me turned. My ladies’ Wednesday morning social club has been knitting for months, and wanted to find someone to give children’s mittens and hats to. Would you be willing to take them?

Mittens. Bags and bags of mittens.

A local bakery asked if they could donate day-old pastries and bread. Every week... boxes and boxes and boxes of bread.

Another year, the weekend before the big budget meeting, we’d spent more money on resources for more cold, hungry people than ever before. We were gonna hit zero this time—I just knew it.

As I was leaving the church building, a cluster of Harvard students slammed through the door, beaming and breathless. “We had our Dunster House dance last night,” they said, “and for admission we charged $5 a piece—we had a HUGE crowd—all of it to be donated to the pantry. Surprise!”

Year after year after year, and always just before the annual meeting. Surpluses. Always, despite all my efforts—apparently, for God to make a point.

During those years the pantry was the most profitable arm of our church. And the laugh, the wink, was always on me. Me, the minister with the curly-fried hair, who doesn’t trust well, who excels in worry, even when I can see that Christ is walking on water, right there on the crest of the waves—I’m back here clutching the mast.

Eight years. And the loaves and fruit and mittens and meat kept coming. Bags and racks and boxes and baskets and checks.

God’s love, like the deep end of the ocean where no one’s touched the bottom yet. Higher and deeper and longer and wider than we know how to measure. God’s power working within us, to accomplish far more than we could ask or imagine.

It’s all about an abundance you didn’t see coming, excess you didn’t earn, some kind of surplus from God you couldn’t spend up if you tried. And it’s something different that this God is about.

I wonder what would happen in your life and mine, what strength we might find, if we could loosen our grip on the loaves and free up the fish.

I don’t know what the answer is—in your life or mine, or in our lives in this church together—but I do know, there’s something to be learned from children and fingers unfurled and fishes and loaves.

May God give us compassion and courage.

—Joy Jordan-Lake is a minister, writer, and teacher at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. This sermon was printed in Sacred Seasons, Hunger Emphasis 2003.
The parable of the sheep and the goats is nobody's favorite story. There are lots of paintings of the waiting father embracing the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan helping the man in the ditch, but there aren't any pictures of the goats being damned on the walls of children's Sunday school classes. Growing up, I was in church every Sunday that I didn't pretend to have a cold, and I don't remember ever hearing a sermon on this story. If there are hymns on this parable, nobody sings them. In Bible studies, this is one of those passages where the teacher ends up saying, “Okay, we agree that Jesus didn't mean what he said, but what did he mean?” Most of the time we just skip this part—and with good reason.

Jesus was on the Mount of Olives when he told everyone to take a seat. “This is important. Listen carefully. Judgment Day is coming and there will be surprises. The judge will divide the people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. “Then the King will say to those on the right hand, ‘Come and get your reward. When I was a victim of famine, you sent food. When I needed a drinking well, you took up an offering. When I was homeless, you found me a room. When I was shivering, you gave me a coat. When I was in prison, you tried to help. Now it’s time to show my appreciation.’

“Those people will say, ‘We don’t mean to seem ungrateful, but we don’t remember any of that. When did we do those things for you?’

“And the judge will answer, ‘You’ve been doing it all your lives. Every time you helped one of your needy brothers and sisters, you cared for me.’

“Then the King will turn to the goats on the left hand and say, ‘To hell with you. When I was hungry, you kept your money in your wallet. When I had only polluted water to drink, you were worried about your IRA. When I was homeless, you wouldn’t even look me in the eye. When I was cold, you had extra blankets in your closet. When I was in prison you said, ‘Let’s build more prisons.’

“And those people will say, ‘We never did that to you. As for the poor, we don’t know any poor people.’ And the judge will say, ‘You’ve condemned yourselves.’”

This story is disturbing because it’s about how God sees us. Religious people try to boil down the wonderful biblical theme of salvation, wholeness and healing, into a simple
formula—four spiritual laws or five steps to be saved. This is as close as Jesus ever comes to summarizing what salvation means, but no one ever puts this on their church’s web site under the heading, “How to Become a Christian.” According to Jesus those who don’t care for the poor have missed the gospel. Regardless of what’s said at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning in most churches, people who neglect the needy aren’t God’s people. How could Jesus have been any clearer?

This story is disturbing, because we are calorie counters in a hungry world. Have you noticed that our meals have been getting bigger? As recently as five years ago, a 10-inch plate was standard in restaurants. Today the standard is 12 inches and one chain is experimenting with a 15-inch model.

“And those people will say, ‘We never did that to you. As for the poor, we don’t know any poor people.’ And the judge will say, ‘You’ve condemned yourselves.’”

It wasn’t that long ago that 20 ounces of soda seemed thirst quenching enough. Then in 1976, Seven-Eleven introduced the 32-ounce Big Gulp. They followed that with the 44-ounce Super Big Gulp and the 64-ounce Double Gulp. The human bladder, meanwhile, has a capacity of about 13 ounces. Do the math on that one. America’s obesity rate is three times that of European countries, even though we eat many of the same foods. Americans eat more—even as much of the world starves.

The story of the sheep and the goats is disturbing, because most of us haven’t done much. We try not to think about hunger because the problem seems overwhelming. The statistics are mind-boggling. By one hunger relief organization’s recent estimate, 24,000 people die each day of hunger-related diseases. That’s 1,000 an hour, 17 each minute.

The statistics are so overpowering that the victims become statistics. It’s easy to forget that hunger is suffered one missed meal at a time, one person at a time.

The numbers are sobering, but the faces are far worse. The faces of hunger are the faces of children. Three quarters of those who starve are under the age of 12. Hungry children have eyes that are dulled by insufficient protein. The lack of nutrition means that their mental development is permanently impaired. Many will never be able to think for themselves. Their stomachs are bloated. Their arms and legs are spindly. Their hair is thin. They have no energy. And every one of them has a name—a six-year-old named John, a nine-year-old named Angela.

The resident of a slum in Brazil, Iracema da Silva, said, “Sometimes I think, if I die, I won’t have to see my children suffering as they are. So often I see them crying, hungry, and there I am, without a cent to buy them bread. I think, God, I can’t face it! I don’t want to look any more.”

The faces of hunger are the faces of mothers. Fathers often walk away from children they can’t feed. Mothers are less likely to leave. These poor, sad, lonely, frightened, frail, sick women suffer not only their own suffering, but also that of their children.

These are the words of a mother in the Philippines, a Mrs. Alarin: “I feel so sad when my children cry at night because they have no food. I’m so worried about the future of my children. I want them to go to school, but how can I afford it? I’m sick most of the time, but I can’t go to the doctor because each visit costs too much and the medicine is extra. What can I do?” Hunger is a hundred million mothers weeping, because they cannot feed their children.

The faces of hunger are old. They are wrinkled, tired, and miserable. Their eyes are sunken. Their sight is dim. Their cheekbones protrude. Their teeth are gone because, in their poverty, they know nothing of dental care. Against all odds, they have managed to grow old; and now they have fallen on such hard times that many hope for some sudden fatal disease that will release them from their misery. It’s hard to see the faces of hunger.

Our lack of concern is embarrassing. We lose sleep over problems at work, difficulties at school, and family troubles, but few of us lose sleep over children starving. We tell ourselves there’s nothing we can do about it, but we know that isn’t true. The problem isn’t a lack of food. If the world’s present food supply were distributed equally, there would be enough for everyone to have more than 3000 calories a day. The major cause of hunger is the apathy of those who have more than they need.

We’re capable of more concern than we let ourselves feel. More than that, we’re capable of the compassion that would lead us to action. Jim Wallis describes the step between concern and compassion in this way: “Being concerned is seeing something awful happening to somebody and feeling, ‘Hey, that’s really too bad.’ Having compassion is seeing the same thing and saying, ‘I just can’t let that happen to my brother, my sister.’”

We can’t solve the problem of world hunger, but we can make a crucial difference. Mother Teresa was asked how she kept from being overwhelmed by the multitudes of needy people. She replied, “I love them one at a time.” You and I can make a difference for one or two or three.
We can give more generously than we have. We can ask whether we care enough for these people we'll never meet, these children of God, to give up some measure of our own comfort to save their lives. No one following the example of Christ can be content to have too much while others have too little. The rich must live more simply so that the poor can simply live.

A middle-aged couple earns good money and yet chooses to live simply. They go without status symbols and luxuries, so that they can give money to feed the hungry. They live a trimmed-down life. Every month the mother gathers the children around the checkbook.

For each check that she writes to whomever it might be, to whatever cause, she tells them a story: “This is why these people need the money more than we need it.” And so these children actually know where the family money is going and that it isn’t there in the bank account for them to buy a new toy.

The parents themselves choose not to always have new, better, more things. Their children are mature, alive, and joyful. The mother’s check-writing process is Christian education at its best. She’s saying, “This is what love means.”

Our contributions won’t tip the scales of injustice, but we can place our stubborn ounces on the right side of the balance. A Swahili proverb has it, “Drop by drop, the bucket fills.” And our one drop will make a difference—for us, too. It sounds paradoxical, but the more we care for the hurting, the more passionately we’ll love life. Giving is celebrating life at its fullest.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell what God wants. This isn’t one of those times.

—Brett Younger, a frequent contributor to Sacred Seasons, is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas. This sermon was printed in the 2004 Hunger Emphasis Packet of Sacred Seasons.

### Homeless Christ,

Roust us from our burrows of comfort and complacency.
Shake us loose from our nests of isolation and oblivion.
Gather us, as you did your disciples, ‘round a common fire,
that we may see each face aflicker with your radiance.
Remind us that we have nothing and own nothing save our humanity;
that what we need most is your redeeming presence;
that life and faith and food and shelter
are heavenly gifts to be humbly shared;
that tangible love and gentle servanthood
are the joyous paths that lead Home.
Amen.

—Deborah E. Harris

---

art by Robert Van Darden
Strange it is that they would not have recognized him—these two people who walked together on the road to Emmaus. For two days they had thought of little else.

They spoke painfully of him as they walked. Their hearts ached for his loss. Then he joined them on the road. He conversed with them and they heard his voice. They saw him as he walked and extended him an invitation to be their guest. He accepted their hospitality—and still they did not know him.

Stranger still it is that they should come to know him in this particular way: He broke bread and they knew him. What an astounding source of revelation! More articulate than the words he had spoken was his breaking of bread. More vivid than his countenance was his breaking of bread. More penetrating than the scriptures he expounded was his breaking of bread.

Or maybe it was not so strange after all. How often they had seen him break bread! Jesus had distinguished himself as a hearty and even controversial eater. He brought down the wrath of the religious elite upon himself because of his dietary customs. He ate food with sinners and tax collectors in violation of the sanctimonious taboos of his day. When he was hungry on the Sabbath, he proceeded to help himself to the standing but forbidden grain and to lead his disciples to do the same. Choosing the celebrative feast rather than the somber fast as the hallmark of his ministry, he had actually been accused of being a glutton.

In fact, he enjoyed a good meal so well that he felt everyone should be entitled to adequate provision. When the multitude had heard him eagerly throughout a long day, he refused to send them away until they had been fed. His followers had seen him take a little boy’s lunch of two fishes and five loaves, bless this food, break it, and then distribute it to a throng of people that numbered in thousands. He had actually taught his disciples that when they fed another who was hungry, it was as though they were doing it to him.

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus had insisted upon eating the Passover meal with his disciples. After supper, in what was to be his last meal with them before his death, he once again broke bread with them saying, “This is my body.” He shared the cup with them and likened the wine to his blood, soon to be shed.

These were among the flood of memories these men brought with them to the table at Emmaus. Thus it is less...
mysterious but no less moving that we read: “When he was at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him...” (Luke 24:30-31) They came to know Jesus, their risen Lord, in the breaking of bread.

This event on a Sunday in Emmaus need not be an isolated event of revelation. Nor has it been. It has been the testimony of the centuries that not only the devout have recognized him anew but that also those of the world have come to know him when bread is broken. When bread is broken, Jesus is known in the hands that break the bread. He is known in the hungry who take the bread. He is known in the bread that is broken and taken.

We who are in him constitute no less than the very body of Christ. Our ministry performed in his name is no less than an extension...of the incarnation of God in Christ.

First, he is known in the hands that break the bread. Jesus was moved with compassion when he encountered human needs—like hunger. The Great Liberator came to set people free from every sort of bondage—including hunger, and including the greed or complacency that withholds bread from others. With his own hands he solicited bread, received bread, and broke bread.

With his own words he called people to follow and participate in his life-giving, life-sustaining ministry. He still calls us today and judges us when we fail to respond. In his name, in his place, in his stead he calls us to give a cup of water, a piece of bread. As his earliest followers wrote:

“If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go and be filled,” without giving them the things they needed for the body, what does it profit? (James 2:15-16)

If any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? (1 John 3:17)

Deprived now as he is of his earthly body for soliciting and breaking this bread, Christ did not intend to be left without a body by which this same life sustaining ministry of giving bread could be continued. His ministry has not been completed.

Luke told the story in his gospel “of all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1), but a whole separate volume—the book of Acts—was needed to tell how Christ continued to do and teach these same things through his second body—the church. In saving us, Christ is incorporating us into himself. We become people in Christ. We become his new body—the body of Christ.

Quite frequently the apostle Paul spoke of the church as a body, but most notably he speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 12. He speaks not only of the unity of the body (v. 4), and the diversity of the body (v. 14), but he speaks also of the identity of the body (v. 27). It is Christ’s body that we comprise. Although metaphor, this is no mere metaphor.

Christ takes his identity with his church seriously. Encountering Saul on the road to Damascus, he asked Saul who had never seen the historic Jesus, “Why do you persecute me?” He proceeded to identify himself by saying “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Christ’s identity with his church is so real and personal that for Saul to persecute the church was to persecute the Christ.

We who are in him constitute no less than the very body of Christ. Our ministry performed in his name is no less than an extension, a projection of the incarnation of God in Christ. If there is a difference between these two bodies, it is one of degree rather than of kind. God who perfectly incarnated himself in Jesus of Nazareth is incarnated, however imperfectly, in those who bear his name.

Though by now these words may seem trite, they are no less true:

- God has no hands but our hands
- To do God’s work today
- God has no feet but our feet
- To take God on the way.

—Annie Johnson Flint

It is ours to be the continuing agents of our Lord’s ministry, including the ministry of breaking bread for our hungry world. The early church broke bread both in joyous celebration and in equalizing distribution “as any had need.” (Acts 2:44-46) Across the years and the miles, Paul gathered funds from the adequately-fed Gentile churches so that the impoverished and famished saints of Judea might be fed, “that there may be equality.” (2 Corinthians 8:14) We are still God’s agents of ministry to make Christ known in the hands that break bread.

In addition to being known in the hands that break bread, Christ is also known in the hungry who take the bread. Just as he identifies himself with the blessed hands that bless and break bread for the hungry, so he also identifies himself with the hungry who live when we break bread and who starve when we do not.

A few days before his death Jesus spoke of the great judgment of the Son of Man before whom the nations of the worlds shall be gathered. (Matthew 25:20-46) Those who are present shall be separated into sheep on his right hand and goats on his left hand. To those on his right his words shall be, “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....”

In utter surprise the righteous shall answer: “When did we see you hungry and feed you?” And the king shall respond: “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me.”

But that is not all of the story. To those on the left, the King will say: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food...” Then they shall answer, “Lord when did we see you hungry... and did not minister to you?” His rejoinder shall be: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not unto one of the least of these, you did it not to me.”

Surely we cannot read this story without drawing the obvious conclusion: Jesus identifies with the poor and the hungry and he is known in their faces. He is known in their glad faces when bread is broken. He is known in their tearful faces when bread is withheld.

Conrad, a kindly German cobbler, lived alone. One day, according to Edwin Markham’s well-known poem, “How the Great Guest Came,” when Conrad received a revelation that Christ would be a guest in his home, his joy knew no bounds. He busied himself feverishly with preparation for the Holy Visitor. But he was not so busy that he could not help three needy strangers who came intermittently to his door throughout the day—a cold beggar, a hungry woman, and a homeless child.

The day sped on and still the expected guest did not appear. As the day slipped away, Conrad knelt in puzzled prayer: “Lord, what has delayed you?” Out of the silence came a voice:

Conrad, be not dismayed, for
Three times I came to your friendly door
Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was the beggar with the bruised feet;
I was the woman you gave to eat
I was the child on the homeless street.

The growing millions of hungry people in our world are both a judgment upon our overstuffed affluence and an opportunity that presses urgently upon us. When nearly 10 million people in our land, over one-third of them children, live in households experiencing hunger, Jesus is present demanding a response. When one in ten households in our affluent nation reports that its access to food is extremely limited or uncertain, Jesus is present awaiting a response. An estimated 828 million people on our planet are undernourished.

Christ is shown in mercy when his people break bread to them; he is shown in judgment when we do not. Never did Lazarus press closer to the rich man’s door than does the hungry world that presses its claim upon us in Jesus’ name right now. God’s people ought to break bread to them in sacrificial giving, in political action, and in economic sharing of our abundant resources. The challenge is to find the way rather than bemoan our helplessness.

Finally, Jesus is known also in the bread that is broken and taken. “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, and said: ‘This is my body which is broken for you.’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-24) In the very bread itself Jesus is revealed. When God’s people gather together to share the common loaf and to partake of the common cup, Jesus is present—revealed.

But do not think that these are words alone for the cloistered sanctuary or the sheltered altar. They are his words also for the dirty hovel and the lengthening breadlines and the makeshift canteen. Whenever bread is broken in his name, he is being recognized.

Just as he identifies himself with the blessed hands that bless and break bread for the hungry, so he also identifies himself with the hungry who live when we break bread and who starve when we do not.

It was not in an upper room, aloof from the common people but perhaps on a grassy knoll the day after Jesus fed the masses that he said to them, “My father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world...He who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:32-35)

The church may preach God’s love with great eloquence, yet there is no eloquence so persuasive as that expressed when God’s people as Christ’s body feed the hungry in this world. They are the ones with whose needs Christ fully identifies himself. Then does the loaf make itself known as the Lord of the Emmaus road. We rightly sing:

Bread of heaven, on thee we feed,
For thy flesh is meat indeed;
Ever let our souls be fed
With the true and living bread.

God feeds his people not only that we may be filled but that we may feed. We feed in order that he who “is all and in all” (Col. 3:11) may be known. And how is he all and in all? He is the hands that break the bread. He is the hungry who take the bread. He is the bread that is broken and taken.

—Clyde Tilley has been a college professor and a pastor in Dandridge, Tennessese. His writings on hunger issues have appeared in Seeds publications over a span of many years. This sermon was originally printed in Christian Ethics Today and was reprinted in Sacred Seasons, Hunger Emphasis 2002.

Speaking of Hunger: Sermons of Challenge and Hope

Seeds of Hope Publishers
In today’s lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus and the disciples find themselves in a bit of trouble for breaking the rules. Actually, the situation was like this: it was the Sabbath, the day that God had declared that the people should rest. And so, according to the Jewish law, no work should be done on that day.

The problem was in deciding what, exactly, defined work. There were many schools of thought on the subject, even among the Pharisees. It would seem, however, that the particular Pharisees who questioned Jesus on this occasion were pretty strict. By plucking grain to eat and healing a man with a withered hand, the disciples and Jesus had, in the eyes of these religious leaders, violated the Sabbath law.

What is interesting is Jesus’ response to their charge. First, we note that he doesn’t do away with the observance of the Sabbath. The day of rest and worship is still to be honored, it’s just that sometimes there are higher priorities. Those priorities, says Jesus, are mercy and human life. It is mercy that God requires, not temple ritual.

Jesus challenged his accusers to rethink the spirit and purpose of the Sabbath rules. The needs of hungry people were to be considered over the letter of the law. If exceptions could be made in order to save a sheep, how much more to bring healing and care to a human being. How much more?

As we gather for worship this morning we know that approximately 20 million people die each year from starvation or hunger-related illness. About 28 people in the last minute. More starve to death in three days than were killed by the bomb in Hiroshima.

In this country alone, groups like Bread for the World estimate that there are 36 million people who are at risk of hunger, 14 million of those being children under 12. That’s about one child out of every five. And yet how hard it is for these statistics to move us. They’re just too abstract, too unreal.

Perhaps we should speak of Theresa Simmons, a mother of two young children, pregnant with the third. Theresa’s husband was disabled at work and she cannot earn enough to support her family. Without the meals they receive at the local soup kitchen, her children would go hungry.

Or maybe we should listen to Shanequa Johnson, who says, “This is a scary time. My husband works, but all our money goes to paying rent. I don’t want to leave the kids home alone, so I don’t work. Our neighborhood is just too dangerous. Our food stamps don’t make it to the end of the month, but they help. I try to feed my kids well.”

If exceptions could be made in order to save a sheep, how much more to bring healing and care to a human being.

How much more?
Avarice, greed, concupiscence and so forth are all based on the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The remark of Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive is based on the human truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are. It is not just for the sake of other people that Jesus tells us to give rather than get, but for our own sakes too.

—Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking
As strange as it may seem, it is nonetheless true that Jesus may have been killed because of his eating habits. Not so much how he ate as with whom he ate.

There was a well-known proverb in the first century—Jesus may have heard it. It said, “I saw them eating and I know who they are.”

There is certain wisdom there. Eating is more than a biological necessity; it is a social activity with its own dynamics and understood rules. One of the rules is that we do not eat with just anyone. Can you imagine anything more unpleasant or stomach-churning than sitting down to dinner directly across the table from someone you absolutely can’t stand? We don’t do that. We eat with people we are comfortable with, people whose company we enjoy.

That being the case, it stands to reason that you can learn something important about a person if you can find out with whom s/he shares meals. That was the wisdom of the ancient proverb, “I saw them eating and I know who they are.”

I do not know whether Jesus’ critics were familiar with that proverb, but they knew its truth. “This man receives sinners,” they said, “and eats with them.” They understood that the fact that Jesus made a habit of sharing meals with people who were on the margins of respectability implied an openness, a receptivity that was in violation of—and indeed might even be destructive of—the customary ways of structuring society.

They were right. Jesus welcomed all kinds of people. And his hospitality was a threat to the way society was structured in his day, no less than it is a threat to society as it is structured today, whether we perceive the threat or not.

Several years ago, I taught an introductory course to the New Testament at Salem College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where I live. With midterm exams approaching, I offered a review session during the last week. Attendance was optional, and the atmosphere was casual.

After an hour and a half of reviewing their notes and asking for clarification of things they were unsure about, the students fell into a conversation about the portrait of Jesus that is painted in the Gospels.

Jesus is pictured as being comfortably open to people who lived on the other side of the boundary that declared the outside limit of societal approval: tax collectors, traitors to their country because they collected taxes from their own people for the hated Romans; prostitutes; Samaritans, toward whom the animosity was so intense that people from Jerusalem would rather walk around Samaria than through it, which was just as well because there were Samaritan villages that wouldn’t let you walk through anyway, not if you came from Jerusalem; lepers, who were compelled to live in colonies for the deformed and the dying, colonies which,
ironically, became islands of community, for there Jews and Samaritans were welcome, their suffering and almentation created a common identity that superseded religious and ethnic differences.

Jesus welcomed all these people, and he ate with them. One student was trying to make the point that we have become so accustomed to reading familiar Bible stories that we no longer see how really radical Jesus was. But she was having no success whatsoever with one of her classmates who was just not getting the point. Finally, in exasperation, the first student said, “Let me put it this way—would your mother want you hanging out with Jesus?”

In any other circumstance a question like that might have led to a knee-jerk, pious response. I halfway expected someone to break out in the first verse of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Surprisingly, it elicited a sober reply. “I’m not sure I would want to hang out with him,” said the student to whom the question had been directed. “I would like to think I would. But there are people who do the kind of things Jesus did and say the things he said and take the stands he took, and I don’t hang out with them. What makes me think I would hang out with him?”

It was one of those rare moments of troubling honesty, reminding us that Jesus is a threat to the way our own society is set up just as he was a threat to they way his own world was structured.

It is not surprising then that some members of the religious establishments found Jesus very threatening. “So,” Luke writes, “Jesus told them his parable.” He told them—the Pharisees and scribes—the parable. It is always important to figure out at whom Jesus was aiming a particular story. It makes a lot of difference who its target was.

Luke wants us to know that the parable of the prodigal son was told by Jesus to the Pharisees and scribes in direct response to the criticism that he was associating with and welcoming the wrong kind of people.

What did the story say to those who were so bitterly critical of Jesus’ table companions? And what does it say to us?

I will tell you what I think. But first I need to take a moment to point out some things about the larger setting of our text. Jesus actually told three parables in response to the criticism that was leveled by the Pharisees and scribes, not just one; there was a story about a lost sheep and another about a lost coin, as well as the parable about the lost son.

There are similarities between the stories. In each parable something that was valued was lost. In one parable it was a sheep, in another parable it was a coin, in the third parable it was a son.

In each parable that which was lost was found. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin the owner took aggressive actions and searched until his/her lost was found. In the parable of the prodigal son the father waited patiently until the son came to his senses and returned of his own will.

And in each parable there is an invitation to rejoice. Embedded in each parable is the question, “Will you rejoice with me?” The shepherd says to his friends and neighbors, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.” The woman calls her friends and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.” The father sends word to his older son, saying, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.” In other words, “Rejoice with me, for my son who has been lost is found.”

I am convinced that that question—Will you rejoice with me—is the key to understanding what Jesus was saying to his critics. More importantly, it is the key to discovering what the parable has to say to us today.

Not long ago I received a late night telephone call from two old friends. One of the great pains of their life, perhaps the greatest pain, had been the alienation of their only son, now grown. Mental illness and drugs had combined to damage seriously not only the young man’s potential in life but also his relationship with his family. He had broken off all communication with them.

My friends heard by way of the grapevine that their son was living on the streets. Their hearts grieved, and they worried themselves sick, but they could do nothing. Then one night, out of the blue, the telephone rang and they heard their son’s voice on the other end of the line. My friends were ecstatic, to the point of tears, as they described the conversation—how it seemed like old times, how they exchanged jokes, how their son told them he loved them, how they had made plans to get together for the first time in five years.

How insensitive would I have been if, after my friends had finished their joyous story, I had said, “Could I get back to you? I have a call holding.” Imagine a friend calling with the wonderful news that a lost child had come home and asking you, “Can you come over? We’re celebrating! As soon as you can get here!” Can you imagine being so callous that you would answer that you have something else to do, perhaps some other time? Yet that is the accusation Jesus
hurled at the religious leaders in the parable of the prodigal son:

“God’s runaway children—some who left of their own free will and their own foolish choices, others who left

 Too many times in the past, the church has responded as the older brother responded. Even in our own time, the church is often found standing out in the field, away from the home place, away from where God’s family is gathering, with its arms folded, its head thrown back in defiance, and a big “No!” written across its face.

 Not to some supposed political agenda, but to real live, flesh-and-blood, brothers and sisters in Christ, who have faces and stories, and to Christ himself, who said that whenever we welcome the stranger, even if the stranger is one of our own, we welcome him.

 Jesus often referred to the kingdom of heaven as a banquet to which the elite of society had been invited. But those who received invitations could not rejoice with the host over his good fortune; they had other, more important things to do. So the host sent invitations into the streets, to beggars and homeless people, and he welcomed them into his home and around his table.

 In Jesus’ day those who came in from the highways and hedges were prostitutes, the homeless, lepers, tax collectors, notorious sinners. In our day, who would they be? People living with AIDS? Gay and lesbian Christians? The poor? Undocumented aliens? Do we rejoice that God’s children want to come home, or do we resent them? Do we do everything we can to make them feel unwelcome and unwanted? Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that the kingdom of heaven is the Lord’s banquet. Therefore, the Lord makes out the guest list—not us. All we do is deliver the invitation.

 Are the social issues that face us difficult? Are they complicated? To be sure. As Ben Matlock would say, “Ain’t nothing easy.” But beneath everything—beneath questions about scriptural interpretations, beneath vagaries of denominational politics, beneath complexities of social problems—God is asking a simple question: “Will you rejoice with me? My children are coming home.”

 How can we, in Christ’s name, say no, when the very word “amen” means “Yes!” In Christ’s name. Amen.

 —Richard Groves is a minister in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This sermon was printed in Sacred Seasons, Hunger Emphasis 2001, titled “Will You Rejoice with Me?”

 art by Sharon R. Rollins
Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then he told them a parable:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Most of Jesus’ parables leave some wiggle room: “It might mean what it says, but it could also mean…” or “While the most obvious interpretation of the story is troubling, it’s possible to read this in a less disturbing way…” The problem with the parable of the rich fool is that there isn’t any room to negotiate.

One of Mark Twain’s best known quotations is, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me; it’s the parts that I do understand.”

This story is too easily understood. It’s about people who have food in the pantry they don’t need, clothes in their closet that they never wear, and more money than 95 percent of the world’s money. It’s about people with IRAs, annuities, and mutual funds. I wish there was another way to read it, but this story is about you and me.

A young man pushes through the crowd toward Jesus. He walks with urgency and purpose. He’s wearing a purple linen robe. As he passes the fire, the signet ring on his right hand gleams. Everyone’s eyes follow him.

Jesus asks, “May I help you?”

“Rabbi,” the young man’s voice is as imposing as his walk, “make my brother divide the inheritance with me. I want my share.”

“You are lucky enough to have an inheritance? I have no where to lay my head.”
The young man isn’t amused: “I’m not an heir yet. My brother refuses to comply. All the rabbis since Moses have insisted that if one of the sons wants it, the inheritance must be divided. All I want is what’s rightfully mine.”

Now Jesus isn’t amused: “Friend, who made me a judge between you and your brother?”

“Rabbi, I just want what is coming to me.” His voice is as logical as a ledger: “I’m not asking for what isn’t mine. I’m not asking you to be a judge. I just want you to tell my brother to follow the law.”

Everyone is impressed with the legitimacy of his claim—everyone except one.

So what should we do? Praying honestly is a good start. “God, show me how I can help” is a prayer God always answers.

The story is already on its way. Once there was a rich farmer. He was well into his middle years—not like you. He was rounded from the good life, as fat as a banquet calf—not like you.

One evening, the foreman of his farm knocked at the door: “The wheat has sprouted in a strange way, tripling what we had expected.”

The farmer said, “I have to see this.” He had a servant bring him a torch. He and the foreman went out into the fields. The blaze of the torch pushed back the darkness enough for the farmer to see that somehow the seed had multiplied.

The foreman said, “The earth is generous. You are the heir of a miracle.”

But the farmer didn’t hear him. Thinking to himself, having only himself to think to, he thought, “I need bigger barns to hold my wheat.”

The farmer commanded, “We have to build more barns to hold what’s rightfully mine.”

He hired carpenters to build special locks for the barns. When they came to his land and saw the incredible abundance of wheat, they told the farmer, “You are blessed.”

The farmer asked, “Will the locks be strong enough?”

There was no celebration on the final day of the harvest. As soon as the workers had finished, the farmer dismissed them. He wanted to secure the locks himself. When the last wooden bar slid into place, the farmer thought, “I will never be hungry.”

Jesus stares directly at the young man who thinks himself nothing like the farmer: “He never was hungry. That night he died. What will happen to all that was rightfully his? Whose inheritance will it be now?”

It seems likely that not long afterwards one of the disciples discreetly took Jesus aside and said: “You know that I’m a big fan of your parables. I think they’re great. But I hope you don’t mind if I offer just a little constructive criticism on this last one, the rich farmer who dies. You may not realize how people hear that. When you tell that story it sounds like you’re trying to make rich people feel guilty.

“People think that you’re insinuating that they’re somehow responsible for starving people. I know that money is a big issue for you, but if you want them to give, tell them it will feel good, make them happy, and contribute to their sense of fulfillment. You need to realize that when you make people feel guilty they also get angry.”

Jesus would have replied, “People who are storing grain while others starve should feel guilty until they share what they have.”

This story is so harsh. The rich man is a successful businessperson who worked hard and has been rewarded. He sets aside savings so that he can enjoy his retirement. What’s wrong with that?

Yet Jesus insists on calling the man a fool. Maybe Jesus thinks he’s a fool because only fools pretend not to see the people who need what they have. In the 46 Greek words in this parable the farmer refers to himself—I, my, or mine—12 times. When he realizes that he has more than enough the one thing that never enters his mind is to give some away.

It’s hard for people like us to see people who are starving. The gap between the rich and the hungry is increasing. We are in the 34 percent of the world’s population that uses 87 percent of the world’s resources. The poorest one-fifth of the world—more than a billion people—receives about one-and-a-half percent.

The Dow Jones is at an all-time high and we’re in the group that has trouble choosing which restaurant while others starve. We count calories, because we eat too much while others don’t get enough to stay alive.

Development and aid agencies report that about 27,000 people die every day from hunger-related diseases. Famine and wars cause about 10 percent of hunger deaths, and these tend to be the ones you hear about most often.

The majority of deaths from hunger are caused by chronic malnutrition. Families facing extreme poverty are unable to get enough food to eat. Three-fourths of the deaths are children under the age of five. During this hour of worship over 800 children will die. That’s too horrible to imagine.

On the United Nations hunger web site, they used to begin with a map of the world with countries lighting up one at a time—India, Mexico, China, Thailand, Russia, India again, Romania, Indonesia. When a country lit up it represented someone in that country dying of hunger. It happened every 3.6 seconds.
They received complaints until they took the map down and replaced it with merchandise you can purchase. The map was too depressing. It was hard to watch those lights coming on and think about all that we have. Should we be spending money the way we do while children starve? The rock star Bono said, “Where you live in the world should not determine whether you live.” But it does.

We are appropriately appalled by violence aimed at children in schools. We should be just as angry at the violence of hunger. What’s more violent than children starving to death? What are we going to do to help?

Feeling guilty won’t do anybody any good if it leaves us feeling helpless. Thinking “that’s so sad” doesn’t help, but deciding, “I can’t let that happen to my sister, my brother” will lead us to make a difference.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN says that the world already produces enough food to provide everyone with at least 2,700 calories per person per day. We need to reduce poverty through shared economic development. We can help people in poor countries train for jobs where they can make enough money to survive. We can provide information, seeds, and tools that make farming more productive.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.” Did Jesus believe that it was possible for everyone to have enough? Some scholars argue that Jesus is insisting that no one should go hungry, because his followers shouldn’t allow it to happen. We should hear the cries of the poor and not turn a deaf ear. We should share our resources and not hoard them.

We should simplify our lifestyles and not ignore the hungry. We should become advocates for the oppressed, creating a world built upon economic and social justice. Why did Jesus think his disciples would do this? Perhaps Jesus believed they would see the sacrifices he made to help others and follow suit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached, “To allow the hungry person to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one’s neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one’s neighbor. It is for the love of Christ, which belongs as much to the hungry person as to myself, that I share my bread with him.”

So what should we do? Praying honestly is a good start. “God, show me how I can help” is a prayer God always answers. God will lead us to take some of the grain out of our barns and share it with people who need it. Our hunger offering won’t make a difference for everyone who is hungry, but it will make a life-saving difference for a few of God’s children.

Jesus ends his gruesome parable with the death of the farmer. Maybe he thinks that reminding us that we’re going to die will push us to get on with things that matter. A grim Spanish proverb says, “There are no pockets in a shroud.”

Luke doesn’t tell us how the people who heard Jesus’ parable responded. It’s such a difficult story that we tend to assume that most people tried to explain it away or just ignored it, and that’s probably true.

We are appropriately appalled by violence aimed at children in schools.

We should be just as angry at the violence of hunger. What’s more violent than children starving to death?

What are we going to do to help?

But it’s also possible that there was in the crowd a man who had a barn filled with grain who was considering building a new barn. His accountant told him that he should look for places to put his wealth. The rich man was used to thinking only of himself, but when Jesus told this parable, he decided he didn’t want Jesus’ story of the rich man to be his story. He looked at his bank statement and knew that he had money he could give away and never miss it, but he wanted to give enough to miss it. He wanted to stop buying luxuries for himself and start living generously for others.

And so he did. He gave money to buy a grinder to grind meal, provide livestock, and feed homeless children. His accountant didn’t like it. He assumed his rich employer was now less rich, but the rich man knew his accountant was wrong. In learning to give, he became richer than ever before.

We can imagine a better ending to the story. Imagine hungry children in Romania sitting down to a nutritious meal at the only school that will allow them to attend. Imagine the members of the Kinigi Church in the Congo sharing grain with the mothers of malnourished children. Imagine a farmer in Thailand listening to a missionary explain how these new seeds will enable the farmer to feed his family. Imagine a homeless child in Russia getting medical attention from a caring doctor. Imagine a family in Indonesia walking to church to receive the gift of a goat that will make the difference between life and death.

There are far more important questions for us to ask than “How much do we have stored away?” We need to ask, “How much do we have in common with the rich fool? Will we share what we’ve been given? How can we miss this opportunity to help God’s children?”

— Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas. This sermon was printed in a special worship resource issue of Hunger News & Hope (Volume 9 No 1, Summer 2007) called “Bread for All.”
Speaking of Hunger: Sermons of Challenge and Hope

Do the Right Thing

a sermon by Raymond Bailey

Luke 10: 25-37

On the Fourth of July this year, America celebrated a new champion! Not only did he win a championship for us, but he defeated a foreigner in the process. I’m talking about Joey Chestnut, who consumed 66 hotdogs in 12 minutes. The news made every newspaper and every news channel. Word went out not only throughout the United States, but around the world.

And how does it make us look? An icon of gluttony—is that what stands for who we are? We are those who measure success on the basis of how much one can consume in the shortest amount of time. All this, while millions around the world go hungry.

The message was clear to the young lawyer, as Jesus’ message is clear over and over again, that the people who follow Jesus are people who strive to love God—to love God by loving one another and loving other people. In fact, one could say that a great deal of the New Testament is devoted to answering the question which the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

Surely, we do live today in a global village; our “neighbors” are near and far. You and I have to be concerned for those who suffer, whether they suffer from hunger, from poor health care, from war, or from despair and fear. It is our concern because they are our neighbors and as the people of God we have responsibility.

The Samaritan did something. How important that is, of all the things we might focus on! That little phrase, ‘Do this! Do this thing!’ Jesus tells the inquirer that the Samaritan “did something.” Most of us Christians today are better talkers than doers.

Today we might try to fill in the word Samaritan. That’s a word that doesn’t have a great deal of meaning to us, except those who have studied this story over and over again in Sunday school, throughout our lives. Today we might say that an Iraqi saw him after two Americans had passed him by—going about their daily business, going to prayer, rushing to a worship service, hurrying on to care about religious matters, passing by someone in need on the side of the road, or perhaps hurrying to get to the next battle.

But the Iraqi stopped to care for him. Perhaps the best contemporary personification would be “Muslim.” The Jews were as shocked that a Samaritan did the “Christian” thing as some of us would be that a Muslim did.

Each and every one of us can do something. We can do something about the suffering of our neighbor; we can do something about the pain that is a part of this world; we can do something to ease the suffering of others.

I want us to think this morning about three stories—stories of people who did something. The first is a story told by former President Jimmy Carter. He tells the story of the Ethridge family, Jerome and Joann Ethridge, who lived in his hometown of Plains, Georgia. The Ethridges were farmers, had a simple little farm. Farming was their thing.

They were members of the little Plains Baptist Church where the Carters were members. They heard, as you have heard, through the years—in sermons time and again, in
It is so easy to talk about the Good Samaritan, so easy to talk about loving one’s neighbor, so easy to talk about loving God. It is much more difficult to do something about it.

Vacation Bible School, in Bible study—of how we are all called to be missionaries, all called to do something for the Lord. And they decided they would respond to that call.

So the Etheridges—though not one of them had ever had a foreign language course and spoke English with a Georgian accent—were determined to “do something.” They did a little research and decided there was a need in Togo, French-speaking Togo. And so they studied the French language and went to Togo.

When they arrived, they looked around to see how they might serve God and how they might serve the people there. They found in a close radius to the area where they were working five religious organizations: two Catholic churches and three Muslim mosques. They decided there wasn’t a need for another church at that time or in that place, but there were other needs.

So Jerome wrote back to some friends in North Carolina and persuaded them to purchase for him some well-drilling equipment. This all occurred the same year that Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States. The equipment arrived, and, in the years that followed, he drilled 130 water wells and built a bridge. In that area there are now 80 Christian churches and 5,000 Christians.

The Etheridges came home to the States last year, simple people, ordinary people doing extraordinary things because they responded and answered the call of God.

Jean Vanier was the son of a Canadian diplomat and an officer in the Royal Army. After he retired, he moved to France, where he took into his home two mentally disabled persons. These two people had been in a local institution called an asylum. We don’t use that word a great deal anymore, but it was an asylum.

Everyone told him he was crazy to take that risk, to bring these kind of people into his home—a risk to him and to his family—but he did it anyway. He declared that the way to get ahead in the world was to go down the social ladder rather than up the social ladder. He discovered the biblical notion that the way to serve God was to serve those people who needed him the most.

He proceeded at that point to establish the L’Arche Community. Perhaps you know about L’Arche. It was the place where the famous Catholic writer, Henri Nouwen, spent his last days ministering. Vanier established that village, and now 130 L’Arche Communities exist in 33 countries and on six continents.

The people at L’Arche live in community. Vanier said everyone needs to live in community. The best times in those communities, he said, are those times of celebration, special occasions, Christmas, birthday parties, all kinds of special occasions, when we get together, and we celebrate life. That is how we celebrate community. And a place of suffering is a place where Jesus is surely to be found.

We can say about Vanier as we can say about the Etheridges, they saw a need and decided to do something for Christ. That call comes to us time and time again as we look around. In what way can we see a need and do something? It is so easy to talk about the Good Samaritan, so easy to talk about loving one’s neighbor, so easy to talk about loving God. It is much more difficult to do something about it.

Scott Neeson was a Hollywood producer. At one time, he was president of Twentieth-Century Fox. Later, he became president of Sony Pictures. In 2003, he took a vacation. The story I read didn’t say why he took this particular vacation, or why he went where he did. It’s not the sort of place most of us would have chosen, but he went to Cambodia to spend his vacation.

It was there in Cambodia as he wandered about that he saw children living in garbage heaps. The only food they got, the only sustenance they had, was whatever they could get out of the garbage dump. Dirty, stinky, uncared-for, unloved, small children, children of all ages suffering in that place. He decided he ought to do something about it.

So he came back home and started the Cambodian Children’s Fund and raised millions of dollars to establish care for the children of Cambodia. That’s a marvelous act in and of itself. Many of us, if we had a lot of money or a little extra money, would love to establish a fund, or to give to a fund, and satisfy ourselves in that way. Thank God for those who make or inherit money and spend it doing something for God.

But Neeson wasn’t satisfied with just raising money. He said the vision really came to him one day when an actor under contract with his studio called him from a distant location and complained because his private jet did not have all of the amenities expected. The actor just didn’t know what to do, felt like he had been neglected, didn’t know whether he should withdraw from the picture, whether he should make the trip or not, because the jet just couldn’t be like this. Soon the agent called and said to Neesen, “Life just isn’t meant to be this difficult.” It was then that Neeson said he realized that his time and effort could be better spent in other places.

So Neeson resigned his job and went to Cambodia to live among those Cambodian children and care for them.
The Hollywood critics were everywhere. The papers wrote, “This is just a trick on his part. He’s trying to get out of his contract so he can take a better job, get a better contract with someone else. And as soon as his contract is done with Sony, he’ll be able to sign on with somebody else. He doesn’t really mean it.”

But that has been some time ago, and he’s still there, remains there and says he’s the happiest he’s been in his whole life, caring for those children. Neeson doesn’t claim to be a Christian, but he certainly acts like one.

That ought to embarrass us even more. Here is someone living the Christian way, doing what Jesus would have his followers do, who doesn’t even claim Christian heritage.

Do something. Each and every one of us can be a Samaritan. There is someone that each of us can help along life’s way. There’s someone in our neighborhood that we can help. And there are many all over the world who can benefit in one way or another from our gifts.

Our children learned, in Vacation Bible School this year, that a person can purchase goats through the Heifer Project, work through our local hunger farm, and provide food for people faraway across the country globe. It is good for our young people to go to Mississippi, to see young people not living their kind of life, people with needs, people who didn’t have enough to eat.

Our youth noticed that the children in that area often came late to events. They didn’t come for all the Bible teaching. They didn’t even come for all the games. But they came when the food was served because, it was evident, that was the only meal some of them got each day during that week. All they had to eat was the food that was provided through the mission trip of your young people, doing something for Christ.

---

Do something in service for God. You and I are called to seek those ways, look for those persons, find those places, so that we can use our gifts, whatever those gifts may be, in the service of God. God takes greatest pleasure, not from burnt offerings on an altar, not from our coming in our best clothes every Sunday to church, not even from our appropriate practice of the ordinances. Those things are important. Worship is important. But the greatest worship we do is the service of the people. It’s really what the biblical term from which we get the word worship means: the service of the people.

There are Samaritan hospitals, Samaritan psychological counseling centers, Samaritan food banks, Samaritan stores here and yond, all over the United States and in many other areas of the world. But we all need to know what it really means to be the “Good Samaritan.” We need to know the joy of doing something, giving something, not expecting anything in return. That’s what it means to follow the way of Christ.

—Raymond Bailey is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, the church which houses the Seeds of Hope offices. He preached this sermon on July 15, 2007. The three stories he relates, as well as others, can be found in The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World by Bob Abernathy and William Bole (New York, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007; 420 pp.)

---

art by Sally Lynn Akins

From the times we take the bread of life and do not see it as holy
From the times we worship in select spaces closing our eyes to the whole
From the times when theology lives in our heads and not in our hearts and stomachs
God of all things, wake us.
—Jeremy Rutledge
What! Does the Lord Require?
a sermon by Larry Bethune
Scripture: Micah 6:1-8

Friday is my day off, and one Friday, between my daily readings of Niebuhr and Barth, I caught an episode of The People’s Court. What a sad case it was! Even Judge Marilyn, who’s seen it all, was shocked by the testimony of a mother suing her lazy son for stealing $1,000 from her. Andrea said her son Ian had such a tendency to violence; she had to get an order of protection against him.

Ian told the judge he gets assistance from the government because his asthma is so bad he can’t work. But he confessed he spends most of his money to buy cigarettes and weed, so he runs a little short by the end of the month. (I’m not making this stuff up!) Judge Marilyn called Ian a “mama’s boy” and told him to grow up, go to school and get out of his mother’s house. She ruled in favor of Andrea and granted her $2,920.

How bad would it have to get for a mother to drag her own son into court? Can you imagine that? But imagine this: things getting so bad a god drags into court the people who worship that god. That’s what the prophet Micah saw happening to his own people. They were sued by the God we worship!

Micah was a country boy. He had no use for the big city. “What is the transgression of Jacob?” he asks. “Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?” (Micah 1:5)

But it wasn’t urban decadence per se that offended Micah. It was their widespread idolatry. It was their abuse of power. It was their unfair business practices and their war on the poor. It was their misplaced faith in their military might and their arrogant presumption that God was always on their side.

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. Therefore thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time. (Micah 2:1-3)

Even the priests were greedy. The other prophets preached only what the people wanted to hear, and the kings protected the wealthy against the poor.

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chief of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”
Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Micah 3:9-12)

They were supposed to be the covenant people of God. They were supposed to take care of each other. They were supposed to be a model to all nations and bring the world to God. But they were lazy and violent and foolish instead. So God sued them.

Imagine the people's shock as they came to the temple to worship one Sabbath, and this rube from the sticks started preaching at them:

Hear what the Lord says: “Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the (lawsuit) of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a (lawsuit) with his people, and he will contend with Israel.” (Micah 6:1-2)

It is not the language of worship they are used to hearing, the litanies of the psalms, but the “hear ye, hear ye” language of the law court. God calls the mountains and the earth to bear witness in the cosmic tribunal and then accuses the people before them:

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember…….” (Micah 6:3-5)

God has done everything for them, but they have responded like a violent lazy son high on weed. They have no memory of all God has done for them. And no gratitude.

The people are shocked, incredulous. There they stand in their best Sabbath-go-to-meetin’ clothes, offerings in hand, sheep for the sacrifice. How can this be? Aren’t they doing what God asked just by coming to worship? Isn’t that enough to get God on their side?

Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil! Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:6-7)

No! No! No! Those are the outer forms of worship. If there is no coherence between your outer form of worship and your inner values, if there is no correspondence between your rituals of worship and your behavior in life, you’re just going through the motions here and your worship is a superficial mockery of God.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

This is the scripture which has called together nine churches here in the University of Texas area to minister as a group and to advocate for people in need. We are divided in our views and ways, Catholic and Baptist and Church of Christ and Methodist and Presbyterian and Lutheran and Episcopal and Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ, but we all believe in this message of Micah as the Word of God to us.

It has been called the best summary of the message of the prophets, the Old Testament “Bible in a nutshell.” It sounds central themes from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea. They all said it well, but this good old country boy, Micah, said it best:

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

It’s as simple as that. So why don’t we do it?

The first part is probably the hardest for us, as it was for God’s people in Jerusalem. The question itself: What does the Lord require? What does God want from us? It’s a question we ask rarely, I think. We can’t even enumerate everything God had already done for us before we even drew our first breath. Truth. Beauty. Love. Family. Friendship. A good creation. The gift of life itself.

It was all waiting for us when we got here. You couldn’t make any of it on your own. You couldn’t afford to buy it if it were for sale. Everything necessary for you to be, everything that makes this life so precious, is a gift of God’s grace to you.

But the great majority of humankind takes it all so much for granted, it doesn’t even occur to most of us to ask what the Lord might want in return. And when some nosy preacher spits in our soup by asking in our behalf, it’s a nuisance, it’s a bother, it’s an irritation. We’re often surprised, even startled. “What! Does the Lord require???”

Yes. The Lord does require. Expects. Demands. The Lord has the right, you know? It shouldn’t surprise you. If you dare to engage the question, follow it through instead of...
retreating back into the bliss of spiritual denial, you are in for an even greater surprise.

The Lord really doesn’t ask for much. Three things. That’s all. Actually, three simple Hebrew words. Three words! How hard is that? So why don’t we do it?

Mishpat

“Justice!” God requires you and me “to do justice.” And the verb “to do” emphasizes this is not an ideal, but a practice. It is not a concept, but an ethic. It is not some grand philosophy; it is something you do. It is not a passive state of non-aggression, an I-don’t-bother-anybody-else-so-don’t-bother-me isolation, but an active engagement in the world. Justice is about the equal treatment of all people. Justice is about equal opportunity for everyone.

Justice is about insuring that everyone has a fair share of God’s Providence and no one is left out. Justice is about living simply, about being satisfied with having enough and sharing with those who don’t have enough. Justice is about community.

Justice is about being right in your personal relationships and it is about demanding the right social systems in the land. As William Sloan Coffin observes, “The Bible is less concerned with alleviating the effects of injustice than in eliminating the causes of it.”

In the Christian Bible from Moses to Jesus, mishpat is paired with its inseparable Siamese twin, tsedeqah, “righteousness,” which means being right with God, right with others, even right with creation itself. You cannot be close to God without caring for the people on God’s heart. So justice is where religion becomes either real or just so much hot air.

As James puts it, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God…is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27)

Mishpat recognizes the essential connectedness and interdependence of all things in God. Writes Wendell Berry,

We cannot live harmlessly or at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration…in such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.

For years now there has been more than enough food for everyone on earth to survive. There has been more than enough space for everyone to have shelter. There has been more than enough wealth for everyone to be helped. But children starve, and the homeless wander, and the poor suffer, because 10 percent of the world’s population controls what the other 90 percent need.

We in the top 10 percent praise the Lord that we are blessed, but the Lord cries, mishpat.

Chesed

The second word is chesed, and it is not easily translated into English. “Kindness” doesn’t quite cut it. “Kindness” is too easily reduced to the insipid notion that our whole faith tradition is all about being “nice,” and in the final analysis, mainly a matter of learning good manners.

But surely we don’t believe God freed the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt to be “nice?” That Jesus died on the cross so we could be “nice?” That the church is going to shatter the gates of hell and turn the world upside down for the sake of “niceness?”

But surely we don’t believe God freed the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt to be “nice?” That Jesus died on the cross so we could be “nice?” That the church is going to shatter the gates of hell and turn the world upside down for the sake of “niceness?”

God demands that we do justice. But God also demands that we love chesed. Chesed is a word rooted in the covenant relationship Israel had with God. It means “faithfulness, loyalty, steadfastness, lasting commitment, continuity of relationship.”

It is about staying true to God’s purpose and God’s people. It is about living in community with one another. It is about enduring, forbearing, forgiving—keeping faith with God and with each other.

Thus it includes kindness, but is more than kindness. God calls us to have a passion for caring that stands the test, that does not wither in the storms of real life. Chesed means keeping covenant with God and God’s people, which includes acts of mercy and kindness and a whole lot more.

Halak

The third demand of God is halak, “to walk.” The Hebrew reads literally v’hatznea lebeth ‘im eloheka, “a humble-making walk with your God.” The Jews get another word from halak, which is halakah, “commandment,” which means “a walk in the right path, obeying the guidance of God.”
Walking implies a continual accompaniment, a constant companionship. Walking with God means we live our lives before God, with a constant awareness of the Divine Presence. We are never alone or abandoned.

Neither do we think to hide from God. We do not try to compartmentalize God into an occasional thought or prayer. This, the All-Merciful laughed out loud and said, “That’s what they all ask for. But if I granted everyone this grace, whom would I forgive?”

After all this time, though all humanity knows that God, by any name we call God, wants peace and justice, compassion and community in the world, we have nevertheless failed to achieve it. And sadly, we Christians have nothing to brag about to the other religions of the world for our commitment to justice, loyal kindness, or a humble walk with God.

Who could blame God for getting fed up and dragging us into the cosmic court? But God forgives us. God forgives us. And God grants us the grace still to call us to life, to urge us to wholeness, like a loving parent to require us to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. For God’s sake, for our own sake, for the sake of our children and all the generations to come, why don’t we do it? May we pray?

“Dear Lord and Parent of us all, forgive our foolish ways. Re-clothe us in our rightful minds, in purer lives your service find, in deeper reverence praise.” Don’t give up on us, Lord, but show us the way. We are slow learners, but we want to please you. Help us in this beloved community, to be a model of your way for the others that one day all humanity might live in the freedom of your love and the peace of your Spirit with justice, kindness, and humility. Amen.

—Larry Bethune is the senior pastor of University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas. This sermon was printed in Sacred Seasons, Hunger Emphasis 2005.
At Ease in Zion?
What it Means to be God's People

a sermon by Lynn Tatum

Amos 5:14-6:1; Luke 10:25-37

Ashtrays & the Cosmic Order of the Universe

In the mid-seventies I was a wet-behind-the-ears Baylor student in biblical studies. Having an interest in archaeology, I was presented with my first opportunity to travel on my own to the Middle East. Anwar Sadat had just kicked the Russians out of Egypt, and it was just beginning to reopen to Westerners. So I packed my backpack and headed for the tombs of the pharaohs.

One of my most interesting experiences that summer involved an invitation to the hut of a poor peasant family near Maadi, Egypt. Now, if you’ve never experienced Arab hospitality, you’ve never experienced real hospitality. Don’t misunderstand me; there was nothing opulent. Living as peasants, this family dwelt in a mud-walled hovel: no windows—just holes in the walls. The Spartan furniture consisted of pieces of sticks and scrap-wood roped together with jute.

But my mother always taught me that, no matter how humble the abode, you can always find something on which to compliment the host. This was going to be a challenge. I scanned the hovel; and then I saw it: Proudly displayed, they had a translucent ashtray, hand-carved from alabaster. Trying to be the good guest, I began to wax effusive on its delicate charm. I was amazed, so I said, at the elegant simplicity of its craftsmanship.

Much to my horror, the host went over, picked up the alabaster ashtray, handed it to me, and said, “Take it, it is a gift for you.” The finest thing they had in their home! All of a sudden my anthropology classes began echoing in my head. I remembered that you should never compliment an Arab peasant on material possessions. If you do, they will feel obligated to give it away.

My options at this point were strictly limited. I could not refuse it—that would be the same as saying, “Ha! The best you’ve got isn’t good enough for me!” And I couldn’t pay for it. First, I was a student with zero excess cash. (You couldn’t exactly cash a check in Maadi, Egypt drawn on a bank from Waco, Texas.) Second, that would be like saying, “I can buy and sell the best you’ve got.”

So my only option was to give a gift in return. My tattered tennis shoes wouldn’t qualify. Neither would my worn backpack. The only thing I had of value was a gold-plated fountain pen that my mother had given me for graduation. (It was her advice that had gotten me into this predicament, anyway.) So I gave away the pen.

There were embraces and smiles all around. They seemed quite impressed with my generosity. So when the day ended, I left that peasant hut carrying an alabaster ashtray—and I...

We should not be at ease in Zion.
We should not be at ease with worldly success.
We should not be at ease with social injustice.
We should not be at ease, period.
I don't know what this story says about the cosmic order of the universe, but it must say something. I thought it would make a great sermon illustration, but I couldn't figure out what it illustrated. Then I was reading through the book of Amos this week, and I understood its significance. This episode actually illustrates a fundamental principle—there is a foundational irrationality about material possessions.

When Amos called the elite of Israel to adhere to Yahweh's covenant demands, they refused to hear. They refused to believe that a person could be as successful, as prosperous, as wealthy, and as powerful as they were, and still be corrupt and unrighteous. They believed that material gain was a sign of God's blessing: If you trust God enough, you too can have a three-chariot garage.

But Amos cried out: Woe to those who are at ease with material possessions. Worldly success is no sign of heavenly blessing.

**Burger King and the Good Samaritan**

Our New Testament text today is the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Now, I am student of the Old Testament, not the New, but I would argue that this parable is almost always misunderstood. We usually visualize a hypocritical priest and an uncaring Levite callously bypassing this bleeding, wounded victim of crime. I would argue that to properly comprehend this passage you need to understand an important intra-Jewish debate that was raging during New Testament times.

Jews, among which Jesus and his disciples should be counted, were caught up in an intense debate over what it meant to be a Jew, what it meant to be God's nation. Many Jews, like Rabbi Jesus, argued that God's covenanted people should be a compassionate people—a ministering people—a people concerned about, and reaching out to, others.

Other Jews, with the same dedication, the same fervor, the same level of conviction, felt that God had called the Jews to be a holy, ritually pure, people set apart. As a matter of fact, the term “Pharisee” means “one who is separated out.” The Jews, according to such thinking, were to be a holy nation, separated out, in order to be God's shining beacon in a corrupt and pagan world.

The priest and the Levite represent this second view. They were, with profound conviction, dedicated to performing the rituals and the sacrifices that God had ordained for the Jewish people. The Levites prepared the sacrifices; the priests actually carried them out.

Imagine, then, the predicament of the priest. Picture it: he comes along and finds a tragic victim bleeding on the side of the road. Unfortunately, this bloodied man, according to Jewish law, would be ritually unclean. If the priest so much as touches this victim of crime—if he so much as touches the blood of this dying man—he would be rendered ritually impure and, therefore, unable to carry out the sacrifices that God had commanded.

The Levite is in the same predicament. He may not touch this victim of crime; if he does, he becomes unclean.

What we have is sometimes nothing but a pure, cosmic, accident.

In the eighth century BCE, the prophet Amos was preaching to the wealthy elite of ancient Israel, to people of property, to people of substance, to people of power. The people of Israel had made a fundamental perceptual mistake. They fell into the trap that I fear we all stumble into at one time or another. Those wealthy aristocrats believed that we have what we have because we deserve what we have.

Amos preached during a time of unrivaled prosperity in Israel. The book of Amos is replete with references to ivory couches, luxuriousointments, fine wines, vacation homes, summer palaces. Moreover, archaeological excavations from this era have revealed a stunning array of luxury items: imported fine wares, exquisitely carved furniture, opulent architecture.

The elite of Israel had made a success of themselves. They were prosperous; they were secure; ergo (so they thought), they must be righteous. They looked at their business associates. They looked at their friends. They looked at their social acquaintances. They were all wealthy. They were all comfortable. They were all, as the title of our sermon says, at ease in Zion.

But they had not looked at the poor in the land; they had not looked at the hungry in the streets; they had not looked at the widows whom they had made homeless in order to expand their luxurious estates.
and the all-important sacrifices cannot be prepared or performed.

I’m convinced that the priest felt terrible about this suffering victim. I’m sure he returned to Jerusalem and gave a big donation to the Victim Assistance Fund of the Red Star of David. I’m sure he began to campaign for more centurions on the beat.

I’m convinced the Levite was equally depressed over his inability to help this mugging victim. The Levite probably returned home and started advocating for stiffer laws, for mandatory dungeon sentences, for three-strikes-and-you’re-crucified laws. Nevertheless, both the priest and the Levite saw their duty to carry out their ritual functions as taking precedence over helping the less fortunate of society.

Some time ago this church’s college group asked me to lead one of their Tuesday night Bible studies. The group met at eight o’clock. I had to work late that evening; it didn’t make much sense to go all the way home and then come back into town.

So sometime after seven o’clock, I headed over to this little gourmet restaurant over on 17th and Speight called Burger King. I went in, grabbed a burger, and sat down to do some last minute preparation for the Bible study.

About ten ‘til eight I gathered up my things in order to leave. I looked out in the parking lot and noticed a disheveled, dirty, obviously hungry, old man digging through the trash cans trying to find something to eat.

My wife has often said that you should be cautious about giving money in such circumstances, but always, always give food. Well, I didn’t have time…but, I thought, it shouldn’t delay me more than a minute or two. So I went and ordered a double-burger-happy-combo meals to give to this obviously homeless individual.

The restaurant was busier than usual, and by the time they finally got me my mission-outreach meal, I should have already left for church. To make matters worse, as they handed me the food, I noticed out of the corner of my eye the old man slinking into the restaurant and making a beeline for the toilets.

So I’m late for a Bible study—which I’m supposed to teach; I’ve got a bag of food I don’t need; and there is a hungry man in the Burger King toilet. What do you do in a situation like that? You can’t just walk into a restroom, walk up to a perfect stranger, and say “Hi, I’m Lynn Tatum. I thought we should get to know each other.”

I decided to wait outside. Being a minute or two late wouldn’t be that big of a problem. So I waited—two minutes, four minutes, five minutes. He still didn’t come out. I started monitoring the restroom to see who’s going in and who’s going out. (And that will get you some weird looks.) Eventually, I estimated that he was in there by himself. So I went in to check it out, sort of pretend to wash my hands.

Sure enough the stall on the left was closed. But I still didn’t know what to do.

I went back outside. Now I was really late for the Bible study. I honestly considered walking into the bathroom, throwing the bag over the stall, yelling out, “God loves you and so do I,” and running out of the building. I was getting desperate.

Fortunately about that time, he walked out. I rushed over to him, gave him the bag, mumbled something ineloquent like, “Here, I’m not hungry. Eat this.” Then ran out, got into my car, and went to Seventh and James church, in order to teach a Bible study on, as irony would have it, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I had fallen into a snare as old as Amos. When we place our assemblies, our rituals, our Bible studies, our solemn gatherings above the covenant call of justice and compassion, we need the searing indictment of Amos, “I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.…Take away from me the noise of your hymns.…But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream.” (5:21-24)

Amos cries out: Woe to those who are at ease in Zion while injustice and suffering prevail in the world around us. The Covenant of God is a Fearsome Thing

Finally, we should take note of the terrible and terrifying insistence of Amos, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion…” period!

The covenant of God is a fearsome thing. “Covenant, after all, means “a contract, an agreement, a compact.” When
we enter into God’s covenant, we are not covenanting to relax. We are not promising to take the easy way out. We are agreeing to submit to the righteous demands of a Holy God.

The covenant community is not to be a cushy retreat from the demands of the world. It should be a boot camp, steeling us for the arduous demands of a jealous God. We sometimes hear so much about God’s love, that we fail to heed God’s call to righteousness, God’s call to holiness, God’s call to service.

Some of my first-year students tell me with disarming naivety, “I just can’t wait for the Lord’s return.” Folks, if the Lord walked bodily into this sanctuary today, I would be the first one to dive for cover: For I have not kept God’s covenant—and neither have you.

Amos 5:18 says, “Why would you desire the day of Yahweh, the day of the Lord? It will be darkness and not light, gloom with no brightness in it.” We need to hear the terrifying warning of Amos: “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.” The covenant community is not—should not—cannot—be a place of rest and comfort. It must be a temporary refuelling shelter, preparing us to confront the arduous task of being God’s people in a godless world.

We should not be at ease in Zion. We should not be at ease with worldly success. We should not be at ease with social injustice. We should not be at ease, period! Amos announces, and God demands, a higher calling for you and me.

If we are to be God’s covenanted people, then we are summoned to strive for more than the material comforts of this world, those material comforts that this world calls “success.” We are called to be pursuers of righteousness and makers of justice. Until the day arrives that we live in a land in which it can truly be said that “justice flows down like water, and righteousness like an everlasting stream,” may we never be at ease in Zion.

We close today with a call to consider the words of Amos, this jagged prophet from a bygone era. The words of Amos summon us to covenant with God and to covenant with each other. We offer an invitation to all that would commit themselves to the pursuit of God’s purpose in this God-needling world. Amos calls upon you to prayerfully consider God’s calling for your life and for the people of God.

—Lynn Tatum is a biblical archaeologist. He sometimes dresses up like Indiana Jones to show artifacts and tell stories of his archaeological digs to enthralled groups of children. This sermon was part of a midwinter study Tatum led at on the book of Amos. It was printed in Sacred Seasons, Pentecost/Ordinary Time 2002.

I believe that it is fortuitous and weird that there is the same number of homeless people as there are churches in America.

And I believe that God is going to deal with the Church in the same way that the Church is dealing with the homeless.

And all the theology and all the doctrines are meaningless, unless you lay down your life to meet the needs of those around you who are hurting.

—Ole Anthony, founder of the Trinity Foundation and the Dallas Project