

“Bread of Life”
by Dana Allen Walsh
Hancock United Church of Christ
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The priest was a fisherman, but he hadn't fished in months. One perfect Sunday morning he couldn't resist. He called up the Bishop and claimed he had laryngitis. The priest then headed out to his favorite spot.

The hook hadn't been in the water five minutes before he got a strike, and landed the biggest fish he had ever caught - although he had seen bigger ones. A half hour later, he caught the biggest fish he had ever seen. Another forty-five minutes later he landed a fish that broke the world record.

All this time St. Peter and God have been watching the priest from heaven. St. Peter turned to God, and said, "How can you reward this priest? He lied. He let down his congregation."

God smiles at St. Peter, and replies, "I'm punishing him."
St. Peter is confused, so God continues, "Well, after he finishes, who can he tell his story to?"

Like the priest in our joke, the disciples were fisherman with a story to tell. After Jesus is crucified they return to the fishing business. The death of Jesus had been a real low point for them. They had taken away time from their regular fishing to follow Jesus, to travel along side of him and to witness his teachings and miracles. They had come to believe in the message of Jesus and knew that he was someone special. But now they find themselves without a leader so they returned to the work they knew and climb back into their fishing boats.

I really don't think that they ever expected Jesus to return. They had witnessed his death and it seemed very final. But if Jesus did return, they probably imagined, as we often do, that he would not be as how he was during his regular life. But instead, he would come back with super powers and return with a vengeance. They expected not a humble, compassionate man but instead the Christinator – Jesus more powerful than ever, donning a red cape, returning to punish his enemies.¹

Who they get is not the Christinator but rather, the same Jesus, who doesn't perform a miracle or kick his enemy's butt, but instead, who cooks breakfast for his disciples! The resurrected Jesus calls the disciples to shore and out of their boats, he takes some fish and breaks bread with his disciples. Over the simple meal, they recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior, who is not dead but alive. Jesus fed people after his resurrection, just as he did throughout his life. After the meal, Jesus pulled Peter aside to give him his final instructions.

¹ Breuer, Dylan. www.sarahlaughed.net. Lectionary.

And his final instructions to Peter are very simple and clear. Feed my sheep. No bullet points, no obscure theological references, and no attack plan. Jesus does not give Peter the instruction manual for miracles nor does he tell him to the secret to walking on water; instead Jesus asks Peter three times: “Do you love me?” And every time, Peter says “yes”, Jesus responds: “Then feed my sheep.”

Jesus couldn't be more clear. He doesn't want Peter to convert the sheep, to teach the sheep, or make the sheep be the very best sheep they can be. No, none of those things. Jesus just wants Peter to feed the sheep.

On one level, feed my sheep can be taken literally – Peter and the other disciples should help feed others with actual food and sustenance. But Jesus and his disciples know that feeding people is not just about food, it's about sharing the bread of life. When someone who is hungry is fed, they are given life through the sustenance of the food but they are also given hope by being cared for by another person.

Above everything else, Jesus wants his disciples to now go out and feed others, just as Jesus had done. Before Jesus had given his famous Sermon the Mount talk, he took bread and broke it, feeding the thousands that were present with a few loaves of bread and some fishes. He knew that he couldn't talk to people about new life and the love of God; without showing them how they were cared for by actually feeding them first. And on the night before Jesus was betrayed, he broke bread with his disciples, he gathered around the dinner table with them, as a last act of kinship and love. So it would make sense that Jesus' final instructions were to feed people.

I wonder if the disciples had to confront agricultural subsidies, U.S. food aid, conglomerate agribusinesses, and surging oil prices. But if we as Christians try to live out Jesus' command to feed his sheep, we have a lot of barriers. Everything about how we eat and what we eat has changed drastically within the past 50 to 100 years.

No longer do American families gather around the dinner table every night to eat and talk about the days events, instead there are sports practice, tutoring, late work nights, and school events. More people are eating meals on the go - ordering, picking up, and eating food all from the comforts of their car. And the price of basic food such as wheat, corn, and rice has doubled or tripled. These high food costs affect even the most wealthy and privileged Americans but the impact on poor countries and the poor within our own country is devastating. Especially when on average food accounts for more than half a family's spending.²

The Christian Service Committee is beginning a multi-year campaign focused on the issue of hunger. The concern of hunger is complex and multi-faceted. It involves politics, big business, the environment, and a huge stratification between what the wealthy and the poor eat. Hunger is a global issue – every day 16 million children die from hunger-related diseases. Hunger is a national issue – 35 million people in the

² Krugman, Paul. “Grains Gone Wild”. The New York Times, April 7, 2008.

United States are hungry or at risk for hunger. Hunger is a local issue – 55 to 60 families collect food from the Lexington food pantry each week with that number steadily rising.

The reality of hunger as an issue struck me when I was working at the local food pantry in Neon, KY with HYG in February. One of our jobs was to distribute food to people who came and met the qualifications to collect food once a month from the food pantry. What each family received for a month looked something like this – 4 cans of vegetables, 2 cans of peaches in syrup, 1 can of beef in water, 2 cans tomatoes, 1 box of macaroni, 1 bag of beans, 1 bag of fritos, 1 package of Reese Peanut Butter cups, 1 package of mints, 1 bag of funyons, 1 bottle of assorted juice, 2 cans of Tab, 2 bottles of fruit-flavored water, and 1 bag of M&Ms. If you notice, almost all the food is overly processed and half of it is pure junk food. I love M&Ms as much as the next person, but that isn't what a family should be living on. When I stopped in the public library, a mother and son offered me some of their lunch, which was a big bag of potato chips.

Junk food has a high level of calories and fat for the cheapest amount of money. It's what the poor can afford to eat and feed their families. As Kimberley Burge of Bread for the World, puts it, "Calories are cheap in the United States – it's nutrients that are expensive." Researches found that a dollar could buy 1200 calories of potato chips and cookies; spent on a whole food like carrots, the same dollar buys only 250 calories. It makes good economic sense that people with limited money to spend on food would spend it on the cheapest calories they can find.³

This encounter in Kentucky made me realize how pervasive the issue of hunger is. It's a hunger for real sustenance, for food that nourishes the body rather than harms it. And this kind of hunger is everywhere in America. Just a few days ago, I saw an elderly woman in front of me in line at the grocery store in Somerville buying two packets of Ramen noodles with change to eat for her dinner.

The premise of Omnivore's Dilemma by Michael Pollen, which is a great book on this issue explains that the omnivore's dilemma is in deciding what you should eat, when you can eat virtually anything, has become very anxiety producing. We now live in the dilemma of so much choice and so much contrasting information. And not only do we have a dilemma about which food to choose but we also have a national mindset of scarcity.

We are all creatures of the mind and when our dominant belief system is premised on lack – lack of food, lack, of energy, lack of time, and lack of goodness, we can easily fall into despair or even worse, complacency. When we have a mindset of scarcity, we give up on the issue of hunger by telling ourselves that there isn't enough food to go around so why even try. But one of the realities of our world right now is that there is plenty of food, actually there is enough food to make us all chubby and that's even considering the staggering built-in waste. So in many ways we've created the scarcity that we fear. For example, worldwide, more than a third of all grain and 99 percent of soy is fed to

³ Pollen, Michael. The Omnivore's Dilemma. 2007.

livestock. 16 pounds of grain and soy go into producing one pound of beef. For the same one pound piece of beef, the bathwater of one of person for a year is consumed. That is astounding.⁴

So there is a potential of plenty if we dare to look at food and issues of hunger through a lens of abundance rather than one of scarcity. When I saw Frances Moore Lappe, the author of *Diet for a Small Planet* and food activist, speak in Cambridge a few weeks ago, she said something that stuck with me, “It’s not possible to know what’s possible.”

There was a story on NPR recently that illustrates how “its not possible to know what’s possible.” There is a coffee shop in Kirkland Washington that has no price list on the wall and no cash register. The customers of the coffee shop decide how much they should pay or not pay for their cup of coffee, smoothie, or sandwich. For those who cannot afford a good meal, who are in debt, or are one of the many working poor, they can get a good meal and coffee for whatever they can afford to pay. It removes the stigma around free food and people can pay what they think is right. Erin Peretz, one of the café’s founders believes that generous patrons cover the tabs of those who pay less than what’s fair. And the business saves money by not having to pay for workers or services to handle financial transactions. A business model such as this one contradicts the basic concept of running a business – the exchange of goods for a set amount of money. And rather than a mindset of scarcity, it is really based on a mindset of plenty and empowerment of the customer. It’s a creative way to end hunger – with a “hand-up, not a hand-out” as one person put it.⁵

As you heard earlier, our HYGers have been fasting for the past 24 hours to raise money for Project Bread, an organization dedicated to ending hunger here in Massachusetts. It’s not easy for teenagers to give up food for a full 24 hours. Trust me, they know how to eat. And during their hungerathon, when the hunger pains get bad, they make a list of all the foods they are craving. But they also wrote prayers about hunger and for those who are hungry. It’s one thing to read lots of facts about hunger but it’s another to feel the hunger pains and to live in solidarity with those who go without. As HYG takes on the issue of hunger, they start with awareness – what it feels like to go hungry and from there, they hope to donate some money to Project Bread so that others do not have to feel those same hunger pains.

In a recent article in *Christian Century* magazine, Bill McKibben is quoted as saying that churches and parachurch organizations like Project Bread are uniquely poised to make the local, national, and global connections that need to be made to create real reform in the food industry. He goes on to say that if churches start to take malnutrition seriously, they can link up with farmers markets and local-food movements to begin to create a

⁴ Lappe, Frances Moore. *Getting A Grip: Creativity, Clarity and Courage in a World Gone Mad*. 2008.

⁵ National Public Radio. Supplemented with: Flandez, Raymund. “Voluntary Pricing Lets Small Eateries Give – And Get Back”. *Wall Street Journal*.

more equitable system for the distribution of healthy food.⁶ There is so much we can do! And I agree with Bill McKibben that as a church we are uniquely poised to educate, advocate, and take action so that the poor don't have to choose high calorie junk food, so that children don't need to go to sleep at night hungry, so that there are fair and equitable practices in agribusiness, and so that the voices of the poor and hungry are heard.

There is no Christinator who will return and fix these problems, instead we need to be the ones to answer, "Yes!" when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Then Feed my sheep. We are the body of Christ in this world so let us go out to fulfill Jesus' command. Let us find ways to feed others the bread so that they may have hope and life. To conclude, I'd like to read the poem, "Beginners" by Denise Levertov:

"From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea--"

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
-- so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
-- we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

⁶ The Christian Century Magazine. "Food Aid" article. April 12, 2008.

Not yet, not yet--
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.