

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
We Can End World Hunger
August 3, 2008 - Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Rev. John L. Thompson
Matthew 14:31-21

We have all heard the standard test for determining whether someone is an optimist or a pessimist. Show them a glass of water that is half full. The pessimist will say the glass is half empty, the optimist half full. Our attitudes alter our perceptions of reality. I heard one man say, **“If I didn’t have bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at all”**. The world is full of people who are drowning in their own pessimism. Bad luck seems to follow those who expect the worst out of people and circumstances.

Today, I want to address the problem of world hunger. One can describe the problem, presenting statistics that are revealing and upsetting. One can even raise the level of our knowledge and sensitivity concerning the millions of hungry people in the world. But how does one answer those who continue to ask, **“Why are there hungry people in the world?”** Citing statistics do not answer that question. What some people want to know is **“Why does God let there be hungry people in the world?”** Now I submit to you, that is a much harder question to answer.

In the earliest years of biblical history, the period of nomads and tribes, poverty and hunger were not a great problem. Few lacked food, garments, and shelter, because the tribal patriarchs tended to be capable and just. It was when people began to settle in towns and villages that poverty made itself felt. By the time of Jesus, the problem of poverty was exacerbated by the Roman occupation of Palestine. Jesus ministered to people who, in general, did not have enough of anything.

The story of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. It shows Jesus’ compassion for hungry people. While Jesus refused to use his miraculous powers to satisfy his own hunger, he was actively concerned about the physical and material needs of other people. In this instance, Jesus took a small amount of food and made it more than sufficient to feed several thousand. Despite the appearance of scarcity, Jesus provided enough food for everyone. Without minimizing the miraculous aspect of this event, it may be said that what we often perceive as a scarcity problem is often a different problem altogether. Today all of the leading authorities indicate that the primary causes of hunger in the world do not include scarcity, meaning the inability to produce enough food for the global population. Hunger is epidemic, and we have recently seen food riots in places like Egypt and Haiti. At the United Nations’ food summits, however, the world’s more-developed nations permitted domestic politics to trump both humanitarian concerns and sound policy strategies. In other words, our planet could provide for its inhabitants were it not for the political problems that affect both production and distribution. Millions live at the edge of starvation, yet there is enough.

It is interesting that in the biblical narrative food only became a problem east of Eden. In the garden hunger and poverty were unknown. Genesis tells us, however, that the sin of Adam and Eve affected everything. It is not just humankind that has fallen. We live in a fallen world. This does not mean, of course, that the world is absolutely evil. It is not absolutely evil any more than it is absolutely good. But everything has been touched or tainted by human sinfulness. The joy of childbirth is balanced by the pain of childbirth. We toil for the provisions of life. The ground is cursed. There are plants, but there are also thorns and thistles. As the great ethicist George Kelsey once said, **“There is a**

fundamental wrongness in the world.”

God continues to provide in the biblical story. Creation is still productive and God sometimes acts directly to provide for the Israelites, as in sending the manna in the wilderness. But sin causes us to hoard and to fail to share. In the wilderness some of the people tried to store the manna, but the next day it began to stink and breed maggots. Our providing God gives us what we need one day at a time. The attempt to store resources rather than share them is a sign of our failure. God the Creator never intended for some of us to have too much while others of us have too little. This is the critical element in world hunger today. **“Why does God let there be hungry people in the world?”** The right question is, **“Why do we let there be hungry people in the world?”** God intends for the bounty of creation to belong to all. East of Eden we create systems that provide extravagance to some and nothing to others. This is sin. Our sin!

As with other challenges, world hunger is so large a problem that it overwhelms us and leaves us feeling helpless. Would that we had Jesus’ power to take a small meal and multiply to feed a multitude! But the fact that we cannot do everything should not keep us from doing whatever we can. **“The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”** (Tao-tzu) Hunger does not exist only in distant lands and faraway places. All of us live in closer proximity to hungry people than we realize. Poverty tends to hide in shame, or to be consigned to out of view places. All communities and many churches, including our own, have programs for feeding the hungry. Our programs, like many others are operated entirely by volunteers, always looking for help of one kind or another. As the cost of groceries escalates, food pantries everywhere are experiencing an unprecedented shortage of food. We are needed now more than ever. Also, all of us can become more involved with hunger awareness efforts. Although many of our members are involved in one of the feeding programs of our church, there are some of us who have never actually seen the hungry people we feed, face to face, and what is out of sight tends to be out of mind. The fact is, when everyone cares we can end hunger.

Jesus never criticized the poor. To the contrary, his rebukes were directed toward the rich. Jesus had nothing but compassion for the poor, and identified with no one more than the poor. Jesus said the judgment of God is inevitable for those who deny food to the hungry members of the human family, especially for those whose concern is so much for their own fullness that they cannot see the emptiness of others. In the day of judgment Jesus will say, **“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. . . . Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”** (Mt 25)

Imagine yourself faced with the choice between great riches or a good attitude. Which would you choose? Great wealth never made anyone happy for long, but a good attitude has conferred happiness on princes and paupers alike. There is no greater gift than a healthy, positive perspective. It can carry us through the bad times as well as the good. Nothing fuels a good attitude like gratitude and praise to God.

A good attitude is grounded in a strong faith. I invite you to claim that blessed assurance that **“In all things we are more than conquerors through God’s power and love.”** I would love to be your pastor. And I would love for this to be your church.
