

The Idea of Bread

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The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Bread for the World Sunday
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Ecclesiastes 11:1-10; James 1:22-27; Luke 18:1-8

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”
-- Luke 18:1

Today is Bread for the World Sunday, when we focus our attention, as we do several times throughout the year, on the many issues surrounding food, hunger, poverty, and policies.

If you look up Bread for the World on the Internet, here's the first thing that Bread will tell you about itself: “Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's leaders to end hunger at home and abroad.”

The Wikipedia article on Bread for the World says that Bread is “a non-partisan Christian citizens' movement in the United States to end hunger.”

So Bread is a collective Christian voice and a Christian citizens' movement. But I think it's something more, something deeper than both of those descriptors. I think Bread, first of all, is an idea, because it was an idea that gave birth to Bread more than forty years ago, and it's an idea that keeps Bread alive and well – and that Bread tries to keep alive and well – today. And that idea, quite simply put, is that there is enough for everyone if everyone shares enough.

That's it. That's what Bread for the World is all about. It's about the belief that hunger is not necessary, and because hunger is not necessary, we can end it. The central, underlying, driving idea behind Bread is that it is possible to create and live in a world where people do not go hungry and where people do not have to struggle to feed themselves, which is one of the primary definitions of poverty.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that enough good food for everyone is possible for our world? If you do, Bread's mission and work will make sense to you, and what we do in this church, in partnership with Bread, will feel compelling to you. The idea that it is possible to create a world where everyone has enough will be something that you want to be a part of, something you want to help bring to life in the lives of real people in real time. And Bread has taken as its mission developing the tools to help us do that.

The first tool Bread gives us is awareness. Bread reminds us that hungry people don't disappear just because we who are comfortable and secure ignore them. Fourteen-and-a-half percent of our neighbors in America struggle to put food on their tables.

That's more than 48 million Americans, including 16 million children, who live in households where folks don't know where their next meal is coming from. And these folks live, as we do, in the wealthiest nation on earth. How can this be?

Well, we know that the wealth in the world's wealthiest nation isn't distributed equally or even equitably. A few people have a great deal, a lot of people have some, and a growing percentage of people don't have enough. That's what those signs saying "We are the 99%" were about a couple of years ago. One percent of Americans control 34.6 percent of America's wealth, and the next nineteen percent of the wealthiest Americans control another 50.5% of the wealth, so we wind up with twenty percent of the wealthiest Americans controlling 85% of the nation's wealth. That means that the remaining 80% of us – that's us in the pews, friends – are scrambling to control the remaining 15% of America's wealth that's left after the wealthy have taken more than their share. That was in 2007, and that imbalance has only gotten worse.

That's the reality that lies behind much of the poverty in our country. It's not that we don't have the resources for everyone to have enough; it's that a few of us who have way more than we need refuse to share with those who don't have enough. And the reality that corrects that problem is an idea: the simple idea of sharing, of sharing the wealth.

Now I know that the political spin doctors, who are paid handsomely to work their magic on the public discourse, have called wealth distribution socialism or communism or class warfare. Actually, in our context, it's called taxation, and we've been doing it for centuries. From the Colonial period until this minute, America has never been without taxes of one kind or another, and taxes redistribute wealth. They take excess wealth from private surplus and they apply it to public necessities, like roads, bridges, sewer systems, the military, public education, and the safety net. So much for macroeconomics 101.

And at the level we need to eliminate hunger on the scale we have it in this country, we're not talking charity; we're talking policy. And the reason we're talking policy and not charity is because policy, not charity, created the problem, and it will take policy to solve the problem. Let me illustrate with one example from among many.

This past Friday evening, a group of us watched the documentary "A Place at the Table." One of the policies discussed in that film is farm subsidies, which began as an emergency measure during the Great Depression to keep family farms from completely disappearing – and our food supply with it. But family farms don't produce our food anymore; extremely profitable corporations do, and they're still being subsidized by taxpayers. So we now have this bizarre situation where private welfare is considered distasteful and undesirable, but corporate welfare is considered perfectly fine. Really? Really??

Sharing wealth in such a way that we eliminate poverty isn't about throwing money at a problem; it's about changing the system that causes the problem in the first place.

That was the insight of the Rev. Aurthur Simon and a handful of other Christians in 1974 when they formed Bread for the World. They were tired, as so many of us are, of giving and giving and giving and never appearing to make any progress in the war on hunger. They realized that people of good faith, like us, can never effectively confront a problem of our economic and political system on our own; we have to enlist the resources of that system to change its problems. Only the system can change the system, and we, as citizens, are part of that system, as are our leaders.

And that's why Bread urges us to write letters and make phone calls and send emails and visit our representatives in Congress. Those elected officials make the system that we tell them to make, and if enough of us tell them we want a better system – a fairer system, a more just system, a more humane system, a system that honors rather than mocks the American dream of opportunity and achievement – then they will listen. Or they will find other work.

We're not asking our leaders to work harder; we're asking them to work smarter. And that's what I've said to our church council with regard to all of you since I've been your pastor. I think we're all working pretty hard in this church, but we need to work smarter. We need to be able to plant our mustard seeds of faith, to use Jesus's famous image, in the right soil so that they bear abundant fruit, not the scrawny, buggy fruit of haphazard husbandry.

And we in our church and we in our country can't simply keep putting bandages on the wounds inflicted by a heartless system. That's wasteful and disheartening. We have to change the system by giving it a new heart – a heart that puts people, rather than profits, first. When we make people, rather than profits, our bottom line, we can build programs that don't create problems that we have to solve later. As Arthur Simon put it with vivid imagery, "It's better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to have an ambulance at the bottom." Doesn't that make sense to you? It makes a great deal of sense to me.

Bread helps us do that when it comes to poverty and hunger. Bread helps us construct those security fences that keep people from falling into the chasm of poverty in the first place. Let's look at another example.

We know, from decades of reputable research, that the earliest months and years of a child's development are the most important as far as that child's adult potential is concerned. A child who is deprived of sound nutrition, proper medical care, and appropriate human contact at an early age – even pre-natally – is far less likely than other children to be able to succeed at school, at work, or at forming healthy personal relationships. Children, especially little girls, who are born into poverty have a seventy percent greater chance than their peers of remaining in poverty as adults, and bearing their own children into that same trench.

When we cut funds, then, for those programs designed to help the children of poor parents, like SNAP or Head Start, we are, for all practical purposes, sealing the fate of those children. We're virtually condemning those children to perpetuate the cycle of poverty they were born into, and we rob them of that dream of opportunity that we make so much of in this country. We also take, as St. John Chrysostom said in the quote I put on this morning's bulletin, those things that rightfully belong to the poor, namely, the things that make for a livable, comfortable life. Those things don't belong to any of us in excess, but rather they belong to all of us by right.

And when you rob people of a dream, you rob them of the most important thing they'll ever have. When poor people believe that they're trapped – that the circumstances in which they live today are the circumstances they'll live with for their entire lives – they give up hope, they're robbed of self-respect, and they often become self-destructive.

Last month, a headline in USA Today said, "4 in 5 in USA face near-poverty, no work," and Irene Salyers, a woman quoted in that article said, "If you do try to go apply for a job, they're not hiring people, and they're not paying that much to even go to work,"

she said. Children, she said, have "nothing better to do than to get on drugs."

Our country is drowning in despair, and the number of people trying to numb themselves from their sense of helplessness and hopelessness is skyrocketing. Some of you doubtless saw the headline in the PD last month delivering the tragic news that heroin deaths in Cuyahoga County are on track to reach record levels this year. Nearly 100 people in this county alone have died so far this year from shooting, snorting, or smoking heroin, and a judge I spoke with during one of my courthouse visits a couple of years ago told me that the vast majority of crimes he sees in his courtroom are drug-related. We are a people in despair.

Bread for the World is a Christian organization, and one of Christianity's central teachings is not to give in to despair. That teaching comes from everywhere in Scripture, including our gospel reading from Luke, and that teaching is my text for this morning: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

The parable that Jesus told his disciples was about a woman who kept begging a justice of the peace for her rights, which the judge kept putting off. But that old lady was persistent, and she pestered that judge and pestered him and pestered him until she wore him down and he did the right thing. Not for the right reasons – Jesus says that this scalawag "neither feared God nor had respect for people" – but because he was tired of this woman's righteous badgering. The right person doing the right thing eventually won. Good triumphed over evil, eventually, and even if it was a messy win.

Friends, take heart, because Jesus's parable is the message of Scripture. Good will win, eventually, even though the victory will be messy. This battle in which we as Christians are engaged is waged not with guns and bombs, but rather with prayer and persistence. It is up to the policy wonks in Washington to come up with a fair system; it's our job to make sure that they do. We need to be as persistent as that widow in pressing our demands for fairness, for justice, for compassion, and for basic human rights. None of us will live to see the kind of results that widow saw, and that's okay, because, as Mother Teresa famously said, "God has not called me to be successful; God has called me to be faithful."

Jesus asked at the end of his parable, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" If we're as persistent as that widow, and pass on the Christian tradition of caring for the least of Jesus's family, the answer will be yes. Thanks be to God.