

WHO? US?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When Lardner and Mollie Moore retired after many years of service as missionaries in Japan, our session and congregation said we wanted to find some more mission co-workers to support. We had a covered dish dinner and program about Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) world missions. Before the dinner and program, I gathered information about the who, what, and where of supporting PCUSA mission co-workers. The results of an informal survey at our program showed we were interested in supporting a worker or workers in Africa who were engaged in some type of educational ministry. If possible, we wanted to support someone who had some ties to North Carolina, so we could visit with them when they were home on furlough. That's how we ended up connecting with and supporting Dustin and Sherri Ellington in Lusaka, Zambia. Dustin teaches New Testament at the Justo Mwale Theological University. Sherri is the director of the PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer Program for that part of Africa. Dustin received his Ph.D. from Duke Divinity School and they have NC ties.

During the program that night, I shared information about how mission co-workers are now responsible for raising their own monetary support from PCUSA congregations. At that time, the estimated annual cost to support one mission co-worker was \$75,000. I thought I had explained very clearly that we would be partners with many other congregations in supporting the Ellingtons. When the program was over, a church member came up to me and said, "Are you telling me our congregation is going to spend \$75,000 a year supporting a missionary?" After I explained again how we would be partners with other congregations, I then added, "But wouldn't it be wonderful if we did support a missionary at the full cost?"

I got to thinking about that number later that night, so the next day I crunched some numbers based on the number of "giving units" in our congregation that our treasurer Wayne reported at the time. Guess what it came out to per giving unit per day? About \$1.86 — less than \$2. Here's what you can buy on Amazon for less than \$2 (including shipping): a skull face mask; an 11-in-1 pocket survival tool; a portable lap-top light; grumpy cat stickers; a bottle opener ring; a skinny-size it cook book; a fun with origami book; or trick gum. I don't know about the quality of any of those products, but I can vouch for the value of a \$1.86 a day investment in the Ellingtons' ministry. [Just out of interest, I crunched the numbers using the number of members in our congregation, and the daily amount dropped to 87¢.]

Walter Brueggemann, a retired professor Old Testament at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA and a prolific author, has written and preached extensively on what he calls "the liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity."

He maintains that all too often in the church, we operate from the idea of “not having enough” rather than depending on God’s abundance. Today’s story about Jesus feeding the 5000 is a great illustration. As one person has commented, notice how the disciples tell Jesus, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish,” rather than saying, “Thank you, God, for these five loaves and two fish.”

Brueggemann writes, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God’s abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death. And the people of God counter this tale by witnessing to the manna. There is a more excellent bread than crass materialism. It is the bread of life and you don’t have to bake it. We must decide where our trust is placed.” Then he uses an image we can all relate to: “When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food. Too often the church forgets the true bread and is tempted by junk food.”¹

The disciples were operating out of the myth of scarcity, but who can blame them? When they looked out at the crowd of 5,000 (well, that was just the men; if you include the women and children, the crowd might have grown to 15,000 - 20,000) in a deserted place, late at night, they quite naturally and rationally and responsibly concluded, “It’s getting late. These people need something to eat. There’s nothing we can do. Let’s go tell Jesus what he ought to do with these poor folks.”

Imagine their surprise and consternation when Jesus told them, “They don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat.” In Mark’s version of this story, the disciples incredulously ask Jesus, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” Two hundred denarii was about 2/3 of a year’s wages — quite a bit of money then and now. Where would they come up with that kind of money? On top of that, even if they could scrape together 200 denarii, where would they spend it out in the middle of a deserted place?

The disciples demonstrate the myth of scarcity when they tell Jesus, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” Maybe you sympathize with the disciples — what’s five loaves and two fish among 5,000, 15,000, or 20,000 people? But Jesus simply says, “Bring them here to me.” And in that command, we get to the heart of this story. When you put “You give them something to eat” together with “Bring them here to me,” you hear Jesus’ call to us as individual Christians and as a congregation.

Remember, the disciples and Jesus were looking for a little R&R by themselves after the terrible news of John the Baptist’s death and their busy ministry schedule. It had been a long day for everybody out there in the deserted place. Maybe the disciples weren’t really being hard-hearted when they told Jesus, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” (Matthew 14:15). Maybe they were concerned about the welfare of the masses.

But, as someone has said, they weren’t concerned enough to get terribly involved. At the risk of sounding too cynical and harsh, it’s almost as if the disciples are telling

Jesus, “Let them fend for themselves. How in the world do you expect us to do anything for them? We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” At the least, the disciples are surrendering to the myth of scarcity and powerlessness in the face of the need right in front of them. At the worst, they want the problem to go away. What’s missing is their humble confession, “Lord, we don’t have much and we’re not sure what to do; but what we have we bring to you. Show us what to do.”

When I was in seminary and learning how to do exegesis and prepare sermons, we were taught to look for key words in the scripture passage. To that end, this week I read through this familiar story with a yellow highlighter in my hand. A key word that kept popping up was “the crowds.” Jesus couldn’t grab a minute’s rest. As you read through the story, you can almost feel the crowds pushing against him. There are sick people, poor people, and, at the end of a long day in a deserted place, hungry people. But Jesus had compassion on them — he cured their sick and everybody ate and had enough to eat, with some left over. In Mark’s story, Jesus taught them many things and fed the crowds. In Luke’s story, he spoke to the crowds about the Kingdom of God and healed those who needed to be cured. In our story, Jesus tends to the very real, very physical needs of the crowds pressing in on him.

It’s an age old debate in the church, and you continue to hear about it today: Is the church supposed to be concerned only with spiritual matters or involved in social needs? Personally, I don’t see how you can separate the two, especially after reading the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 and listening to the Letter of James which says, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:15)

Hungry people in the desert is a powerful biblical image. Think about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and being fed by God with manna. Think about the crowds in the deserted place late in the evening with nothing to eat. But hungry people in the desert is also a contemporary problem, right in our backyard. You may have heard the term “food desert.” The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a “food desert” as a “low-income census tract in which at least 33% or a minimum of 500 people live more than a mile from a supermarket or grocery store in urban areas, or 10 miles in rural areas.”²

Food deserts are common in Duplin County, which is one of the most distressed counties in the state, according to the North Carolina Department of Commerce. According to research done out of Mississippi State University and the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, “Most counties in Southeastern North Carolina have food insecurity rates that are even higher than the North Carolina average, especially the persistent poverty counties. Lack of access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food is another issue faced by many Southeastern North Carolina community members. These same areas often also lack access to food pantries and soup kitchens which might be used to supplement limited food resources.”³

Have you heard about the Spartan’s Table at James Sprunt Community College? Fresh food and pantry items are distributed each month to students. The need has in-

creased greatly since Hurricane Florence hit. Bethel Wesleyan Church on Highway 11 in Rose Hill has a drive-through food pantry on Fridays. Poston Baptist Church also has a drive-through food distribution on Wednesday afternoons. They serve approximately 150-160 families each week.

And then there is our own Helping Hands Food Pantry, which was started as an Eagle Scout project almost thirty years ago. Right now we need volunteers to help with this vital ministry which is especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic when so many people have lost jobs and are experiencing food insecurity.

And the list goes on and on . . . and the crowds seem to press against us, people who find themselves in a deserted place with no way to feed themselves. If Jesus looked at the great crowds, had compassion on them, and fed them, shouldn't his church do the same thing, even today?

But we might be like the disciples? "Who? Us? We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." But it has been said that Jesus did not place demands on his disciples that couldn't be fulfilled. Oh, it was true, they couldn't fulfill the demands on their own. But, then, Jesus didn't leave them on their own, did he? He said, "Bring them here to me," and he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves . . .

. . . and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. That's right — even when the disciples doubted themselves, doubted what they had to offer, doubted they could make a difference, maybe even doubted Jesus himself, Jesus included them in the ministry. This story is familiar to us as "Jesus Feeds the 5,000." But, as someone has pointed out, Jesus used what the disciples had to offer and provided the resources that were needed, but the disciples fed the 5,000 (or 15,000 or 20,000).

I suppose the sermon could end right there, but here's one more thought, and it's even harder than hearing Jesus say, "You give them something to eat." Recently I read a quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, recipient of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his work against apartheid in South Africa. His words haunt me, but also sum up my feelings and questions when I think about Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries, the Spartan's Table at James Sprunt, and our own Helping Hands Food Pantry. Archbishop Tutu said, "There comes a time where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

Who? Us?

Let us pray: Lord, impress us more with your gifts than with our need. Help us in all doings to lean on your extravagant love and generous supply of what we need to do what you call us to do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Security," at www.religion-online.org.

² www.eatright.org.

³Leslie Hossfeld and Julia Waity, “Building Community in Hard Times: Food Insecurity, Food Sovereignty and the Development of a Local Food Movement in Southeastern North Carolina,” at www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v132/hossfeld.html.