

Exodus 16:1-21

Mark 6:30-44

October 7, 2018

World Communion Sunday

In the aftermath of Hurricane Florence and flooding

FEEDING FOLKS IN A FOOD DESERT

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.

The campus of Justo Mwale Theological University in Lusaka, Zambia is not very large. The main academic area of campus consists of a square of one story cinderblock buildings that enclose a small quadrangle. These buildings house faculty offices, classrooms, meeting rooms, and the university's secretary's office. Behind the administrative/classroom area is a large chapel. On the other side of the quadrangle is the library. Faculty homes sit off a dirt road that encircles the entire campus. There are some small houses for the married students. There is also a dormitory of sorts for the single men.

What is missing on the campus is any kind of dining hall or feeding facility. As Dustin, Jaco (my housemate from Vanderbilt Divinity School), and I were riding to church, I asked how and where the students ate their meals. Dustin said that was actually an issue for many of the students. The students do have some small garden plots that provide some food. But, Dustin admitted, food insecurity is an issue for many of the students at Justo Mwale.

Jaco then told me about some of the students in his class who only ate one meal a day. Dustin confirmed that, and added that he knew that some of the school's graduates who are now serving as pastors still only eat one meal a day, even though they can afford more food. When I asked why, they said the students told them they had grown up eating only one meal a day because that's all their families could afford. They were used to it and, besides, if they only ate one meal a day, they could use the money they would have spent on food for themselves to help support their families.

We might say that the students at Justo Mwale live in a "food desert." According to the United States Department of Agriculture, "food deserts are defined as parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers." In addition, "To qualify as a 'low-access community,' at least 500 people and/or at least 33% of the census tract's population must reside more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (for rural census tracts, the distance is more than 10 miles)."¹

Notice that I used a definition from the *United States* to describe a situation in *Zambia*. I don't think that's a misuse of the term "food desert," but it should alert us to the fact that "food deserts" aren't found only in other countries far away and far removed from us. Another source answers the question "What's a food desert?" this way: "Defining a food desert isn't an absolute science — factors such as location, race,

socioeconomics and access to transportation are all part of the equation. Food deserts are large geographic areas where mainstream grocery stores are scarce or missing. They are found predominantly in low-income areas, although not everyone living in a food desert is poor. They can be in urban, suburban or rural communities. But where the definition gets fuzzy is in the details. For example, how far is too far to travel to shop for healthy foods? The answer to that depends on each community's makeup: Do people have access to public transportation? Do they rely on cars? Do they have to walk? Ten miles may be too far, or just one mile — it's specific to the neighborhood. Food deserts aren't mere inconveniences to the people who live within one; they're an example of food insecurity and they negatively affect public health."²

You may already know this, but the concept of living in a "food desert" hits close to home. In late January/early February of this year, James Sprunt Community College worked with the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina to give away 10-12 pallets of food to students and staff at a "Single Stop" food giveaway and resources fair. According to a WITN report from January 29, "much of Duplin County is known as a food desert where many people have limited access to affordable and nutritious foods. In a press release, the college says that the poverty rate in Duplin county is 27.7% and that 16.1% of all Duplin County residents experience food insecurity."³

And now when the hour had become late his disciples came to him and said, "This place is lonely/deserted/uninhabited/desolate, and already the hour is late. This place is a food desert, Jesus. Send these folks away so they can go into the surrounding fields and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But Jesus answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat."

What, Jesus? Are we supposed to go out and buy \$19,377 worth of food (that's 200 days of wages based on the median household income in Duplin County) and give them something to eat? What, Jesus? Are we supposed to go out and buy two hundred denarii worth of loaves and give them something to eat? But Jesus said to them (and he says to us), "How much bread/how many loaves do you have? Go and see."

A "food desert" is a very real and challenging phenomenon. The children of Israel wandered in a "food desert" for forty years, and God showered them with manna from above. "Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed . . ." (Exodus 16:21) The large crowd of people that ran ahead of Jesus and his disciples found themselves in a "food desert" when the sun went down. And Jesus used the meager resources the disciples brought to him — five loaves and two fish — to feed them. "And all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of pieces of bread and fish. And the ones who were eating the loaves were 5,000 men." (Mark 6:42-44) According to the census tract, 9,518 Duplin County residents experience food insecurity. And we hear Jesus say, "You give them something to eat! Go and find out what you have to offer and bring it to me." And we wonder, "Really, Jesus?"

At this particular time in our community's life, the idea of a "food desert" seems particularly appropriate. It might seem strange to talk about a "desert" experience in the aftermath of record-setting flooding, but listen to how Mark describes the place where Jesus and his disciples met the crowd — "lonely, deserted, uninhabited, deso-

late.” Those adjectives eerily describe the scenes in River Landing and Northeast and Chinquapin — and in so many communities throughout Southeastern North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence.

It’s striking that this story in Mark’s gospel begins with a bunch of tired apostles telling Jesus about everything they had been doing, and Jesus offering them a little R&R by themselves. You may not have noticed an interesting little detail at the beginning of the story that seems so very significant in light of the fact that at the end of the story we’re told that “the ones who were eating the loaves were 5,000 men.” The disciples were tired, “for the ones who were coming and going were many and [the disciples] did not have time to eat.”

At the end of a long day, as the sun was going down, the weary disciples looked out at the very large crowd in front of them — “like sheep who didn’t have a shepherd” — and they must have wondered, “What in the world are we supposed to do to help all of these folks?” So they came up with a seemingly practical solution — send them away and let them fend for themselves. But Jesus shocked them when he told them, “You give them something to eat!”

There are lots of tired folks in our community who are looking out at the very large crowd of people in River Landing and Northeast and Chinquapin and beyond. You might be wondering, “What in the world are we supposed to do to help all of these folks?” We might be tempted to make the disciples’ original relief plan our own — “send them away and let them fend for themselves.” But is it too much to imagine that Jesus says the same thing to us in our situation that he told his disciples back then? “You give them something to eat!”

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Florence, and for the past couple of weeks, we have seen the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. A week after the first planning meeting to set up the Wallace Distribution Center, 9,130 people affected by the flooding had been served. After one week in operation, the Center served more than 16,000 people. On the first day of operation, 12,500 pounds of pre-cooked/frozen chicken were handed out, along with cases of water.

The Missouri Baptist Disaster Relief Group served thousands of hot meals behind Poston Baptist Church and at the Distribution Center site. The Red Cross and Salvation Army had food trucks around town. The River of Life Assembly of God hot food truck was parked right across Main Street in the First Assembly of God Church parking lot.

And the list goes on and on . . . Mobile Medical Units; laundry trucks; shower trucks; deliveries from across the United States of food, water, toiletries, baby items, cleaning supplies; work crews. With the support of a generous donation and other church contributions, Rockfish Meadows is providing sleeping space, a continental breakfast, a bag lunch, and a hot supper for clean up crews and volunteers from across the United States.

And you, the folks in this congregation, even folks who have lost so much in the floodwaters of Hurricane Florence, have brought your five loaves and two fish and asked Jesus to bless them. You have cooked meals, packed boxes, worked in the Distri-

bution Center, mucked out houses, ripped out sheet rock, held hands, offered a shoulder to cry on, lent a listening ear, prayed over destroyed houses, colored paper hearts and stuck them on ripped out homes, and made visits. You have done this even when you yourselves might not have had time to eat, when you were tired and needed a little R&R.

In his reflection on the desert wanderings with the Israelites, Moses wrote, “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 8:3) At Presbyterian Men on Tuesday night, people were telling stories of their experiences in the storm and its aftermath. Bob Carr from Rose Hill, who is active in the Gideon’s Ministry, told about his phone conversation with someone in the Gideon organization who asked what kind of help we needed here. Bob told him we needed copies of God’s Word, so 1,250 copies of the New Testament were sent to Duplin County. Bob and other Gideons handed out God’s Word at some of the feeding stations in Wallace, as they also offered words of encouragement and hope. “We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

One night last week, Nancy and I were talking about the relief efforts in town and I told her I was feeling pretty ineffective. “What do you think you ought to be doing?” she asked. When I told her I just wanted to help people but it seemed so overwhelming, she said, “You can’t fix the storm, you know. But you can keep on doing the things you’re doing, just like so many other people are doing.” That’s when it occurred to me that if everybody who is doing anything to help anyone suddenly stopped doing those things, nothing would get done. Somehow, somewhere, in all of those individual acts trying to meet particular needs, there seems to be a glimmer of the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish for a great hungry crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd.

In a few minutes we will come to our Lord’s table to eat the bread and drink the cup. We know the little cube of bread and the little cup of juice aren’t enough, literally, to satisfy our physical hunger. But we also know that the little cube of bread and the little cup of juice represent the boundless goodness, grace, mercy, and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Our Lord invites us to come to the table. But, once we have eaten of the bread and drunk from the cup, our Lord sends us back out to feed folks in a food desert — wherever that is and in whatever shape and form it might appear. But we don’t leave the table empty or on our own or with just the little bit we might have brought to the table this morning. We leave the table to face the “food desert” with the blessing and fullness of Jesus Christ himself, who is the bread of life.

Here is a Blessing for World Communion Sunday written by Jan Richardson. It is called “And the Table Will Be Wide.”

*And the table
will be wide.*

*And the welcome
will be wide*

*And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.*

*And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.*

*And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.*

*And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.*

Let us pray: You formed the universe in your wisdom, and created all things by your power. You set us in families on the earth to live with you

in faith. We praise you for good gifts of bread and cup, and for the table you spread in the world as a sign of your love for all people in Christ.

NOTES

¹American Nutrition Association, Nutrition Digest, Vol. 38, No. 2, “USDA Defines Food Deserts,” at www.americannutritionassociation.org.

²Maria Trimarchi, “What’s a food desert?” at www.science.howstuffworks.com.

³“James Sprunt Community College hosting ‘single stop’ giveaway for students/staff,” January 29, 2018, at www.witn.com.