

## YOU FEED THEM!

St. John 6:1-15

Some years ago (1998) a third grader named Matthew wanted to do something to help people who are hungry. So his parents helped him start a program called "Hams for the Hungry," and one year "Hams for the Hungry" raised \$40,000 to brighten the holiday season of some people who spend much of their life hungry. Our story today is about a boy who didn't have much either but what he had he offered to Jesus, and thousands of hungry people got fed. The story says it was a boy who happened to have five loaves of barley bread and two fish, and when Jesus asked for them, he didn't have to ask twice.

You know this story well, most of you. All four gospel writers tell it in their own way. A crowd was following Jesus everywhere he went. Evening was approaching. Jesus knew the people would get hungry. His disciples said: We can't feed them, send them away, let them go into the villages to get some food. But Jesus had a better idea: you feed them, he said. And he gave them what they needed to do it.

What a powerful statement this is for us to hear, living as we do in a world that has hungry people all over the place. You know some of the dismal statistics: more than 11% of the world's people, 800 million, are living in poverty, and most of them in extreme poverty (less than \$1.90/day); in our own country 13% of our people are food-insecure, and that includes 18% of our children and more than 9% of our seniors. Just think of it: someone dies of starvation just about every time we blink our eyes, 12 per minute; more than 700 people will die while we are here this morning saying our prayers and celebrating our sacred meal. One man compared it to a planeload of children crashing every ten minutes 24/7. And just like Jesus' disciples in this story, we sometimes wring our hands in despair and say, What can we do?! We can't feed all those hungry people! But the words of Jesus today, I think, are meant to haunt us: you feed them! Jesus still wants everyone in this world to have enough to eat. He cares deeply about this very mundane matter!

You probably know that the problem of hunger in our world is not a food-production problem, it's a food-distribution problem. In other words, it's not a food problem but a people problem. We live in such a rich world! Even with an exploding population, there is an amazing abundance of food to feed all the people. The problem is that some have too much and some have too little...and I'll bet you know where we fit in.

Can it be true that the U.S., with less than 5% of the world's population, eats 50% of the world's food? That's what I read once. We have more food for our cats and dogs than some people have for their children. It isn't a food production

problem we have. Even with all our droughts and floods, this earth still produces more than enough to feed all the people who are out there. We have the technology and the resources to feed them – what we struggle to find is the moral and political will to do so. We have been making some progress. In the past twenty (20) years, extreme poverty globally has been cut in half. But some recent policies have caused cutbacks and setbacks for the poor. FDR gave us the true measure of our progress many years ago when he said: "The test of our progress is not whether we add to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." Jesus challenges us the same way today when he says, You feed them!

And we can do that because not only do we live in a rich world, but we are pretty rich people. Some of us probably don't feel very rich much of the time. The stock market turbulence of recent months and years has made many of us reconsider our financial security for the future. And when you hear the stories of what some CEOs make, and what some actors and athletes make, and what some people win in the lotteries, it's easy to feel sorry for yourself. H.L. Hunt once told Mike Wallace that he would starve to death if he had an income of only a million dollars a week. That's ridiculous. None of us is filthy rich like that. But in terms of the world's masses, most of us are plenty, if not filthy, rich.

Tony Campolo, a Baptist preacher and a great speaker, was invited once to a women's conference that was being challenged to raise several thousand dollars for a mission project. While Tony was sitting on the platform, the chairwoman asked if he would say a prayer for God's blessing as they considered their individual responses to the project. Tony stood up and shockingly said No, he would not pray for that. He said: You already have all the resources you need to complete this mission project, God has *already* blessed you with all you need to achieve this goal. As soon as you take up the offering and underwrite this project, then we'll say a prayer and thank God for freeing us to be generous, responsible, and accountable stewards as disciples of Jesus. And that's what they did. Leave it to Tony Campolo to hit the nail right on the thumb! More recently Tony stood before a group of people and said: "Today 40,000 children are going to starve to death. I wonder why that doesn't upset us more than it does," except he used a stronger word than upset, a four-letter word that isn't in my vocabulary. Jesus says, You feed them! And Tony says, You can do it, and you should!

This is a rich world, and we are rich people...and we serve a rich God. Some people try to explain this parable by saying what happened is that the

young boy's example led the other people to share the food they had brought with them. That makes for a nice story, and it is a nearly perfect parable of our circumstances. The idea is that at first many of these people hid their lunches, afraid they might have to share them, but then Jesus used this boy's generosity to turn those selfish adults around. So the miracle was not with the bread and the fish but with the men and the women who got converted, and the result was that there was plenty for everyone and even much left over. And that, I say, is a nearly perfect parable of our circumstances.

We don't know how Jesus did it. The point is that when Christ is present, surprising things happen. They happen in hospitals, they happen in marriages, sometimes they even happen in churches. Just give Jesus a little to work with - a little faith, a little love, a little bread - and then stand back to see the amazing things that can happen. We don't need to work the miracle, we only need to give Jesus something to work with.

A little girl did that once. A man was putting together a shipment of food for the poor people of Appalachia. He was sorting out cans of this and boxes of that, and then he saw a brown paper bag staring at him - where did that come from? A little girl happened not to have any of the suggested items on the list, but she had a brown paper bag in which were a peanut butter sandwich, an apple, and a cookie. And it had her name on it: Christy, Room 104. Christy gave God something to work with - was it her lunch, do you think, or was it her heart?

There's no question about it: Jesus loves poor people, Jesus loves hungry people, and in fact Jesus loves all people. That's why he fed the hungry people and ate with the unpopular people and gave his life also for the selfish people... because he wants to teach us how faith works and to free us all to celebrate and to share the bounty of our generous God. I remind you: Jesus did not die to make us smug and selfish with what we have but to make us generous and compassionate. How's that working *for you* these days?

One way we respond to Jesus around here is with our five-days-a-week food pantry, and you've been reading the statistics of how many people are coming and how much we need volunteers to serve them one day a week or so. Our local agency of the churches, People Helping People, has its eye on 28,000 people (15%) in Hernando County who live in poverty, 180 people who are homeless, and 250 seniors who need help putting food on the table. Another way we can help is through our church's (the ELCA's) world hunger appeal. That appeal has been growing annually for many years, and last year it gathered from our 11,000 congregations combined \$21.3 million, a

15% increase over the past few years. I notice that relatively few of our members contribute quarterly or even once a year to our church's world hunger appeal, for which we have special envelopes in our packets. It's one very reliable way to make a difference.

I challenge you, as a beginning and only a beginning, to make a very generous gift to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal sometime in the next month or so. And I challenge you to acquaint yourself with the work of Bread for the World, a Christian agency in Washington founded and led by Lutherans that won't let Washington, or us, forget what is the sad reality in our world and what is the great possibility: we can cut hunger in the U.S. in half in five years, and we can end it in ten. And I challenge you, the next time you vote, to look for candidates and leaders who know how to talk not only about the war on terrorism and securing our borders but also about the deeper causes of global instability, especially poverty and hunger. The United States has committed .7% of its GNP to official development assistance, and we always fail to keep even that tiny commitment. Most Americans don't know that, we think we are much more generous than we really are, but the rest of the world knows how little of our prosperity we share.

So let me conclude with this story about a missionary team in Africa. They were loading their boat to go down the Congo River when a native chieftain called to them from across the river: White man, I want you to come and tell my people about your God. The leader of the group, who was indeed a white man, though his team was mixed, said: We can't come today, we have an appointment downstream this morning, we will come another day. The chief persisted: No, you must come today and tell my people about your great God. Again the leader explained that they couldn't get to him that day but they would be glad to come another day. This didn't satisfy the chief, who waded out into the river and said: White man, if you don't come tell my people about your God, I'll tell your God on you!

I hope nobody ever tells our God we heard that 40,000 children are dying every day from hunger-related diseases, and we did nothing, or next to nothing, to help. Jesus made a little go a long way that day in the wilderness, and today Jesus is inviting us, who go home now I suppose to a good meal or perhaps out to a restaurant for one, to join him in this miracle of feeding the 5,000...and the 800 million. You feed them, he says. That's more than a suggestion! Just like two thousand years ago, Jesus still cares that everyone in this world has enough to eat.

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