

**“Bread for the World”**

**John 6.1–14**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 30 July 2006**

This is a familiar story to most of us, not just because it is a rather dramatic miracle story, but because it occurs in each of the four gospels in our canon. As we look at this story – I see it as parable – I invite you to use a framework that I’ve spoken about before: says – meant – means. In other words, what does the text itself say, what did it mean in the context of the culture that wrote it, and what does it mean for us as people of faith today?

The text says that there was a large crowd following Jesus, because he was healing the sick. The author uses a characteristic phrase “signs that he was doing for the sick.” Then Jesus looked up and there was 5,000 people coming toward him and the first thing he does is to ask Philip where they could buy bread for them all.

The only food in evidence is five barley loaves and two fish, in the possession of a boy. Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed the loaves and the fish to the 5,000 and then there were leftovers...even more food was present after the distribution. So, that’s what the text says.

What did it mean to those who read this story 1,900 years ago? According to German New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann, “The formation of this story derives from the needs of the community.”<sup>1</sup> The community needed healing (physical healing and healing from living under the boot of Roman oppression), and they had a basic physical need for food. Most of us haven’t had the experience of subsistence living and not knowing where our next meal is coming from, but that was an everyday reality for Jesus and many of his followers. I would also suggest that Jesus supplied things that Caesar and Herod could not: healing, feeding the hungry, God’s outrageous abundance shared with the poor, and God’s extravagant welcome to all persons. It was a huge shift for the early Christian community is discovering the worth of people Rome thought of as cogs in a wheel of empire, and the implications of that are huge. My hunch is that early Christians also saw this as a parable, not a literal story, or perhaps a story that points toward a larger truth.

*What does it mean for us today?* It means different things to different people. If I were a *campesino* in El Salvador, it might mean that Jesus is the only one who can provide me with what I need. If I were a herder in East Africa who was trying to eke out a living, it might mean that my faith in following Jesus will result in being fed. To me, a white, male, North American, it’s a parable of God abundance, which is all around us: it’s in the mountain vistas, the rivers and mountains we enjoy. It’s in the church where we worship, the homes we live in, the relationships we enjoy. and it’s in the assets we control and even in the political and economic influence we wield.



Where do you see yourself in this story?  
 Are you Jesus, extending hospitality to the stranger?  
 Are you Philip, saying, “We can’t feed everyone here. We don’t have the ability?”  
 Are you one of the 5,000 who has followed Jesus, hoping for healing and ready for dinner?  
 Are you the boy who has the five barley loaves and two fish?

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<sup>1</sup> Lüdemann, Gerd. 2000: *Jesus After 2000 Years. What he really said and did.* (London: SCM Press, 2000) p. 45.

Where do you see yourself?

Are you having trouble seeing yourself in the story? See if these hints help:

Did you say hello to the person next to you and introduce yourself if they are visitors to Plymouth? Did you invite them to stay for coffee hour? Did you in some way reflect to them the extravagant welcome that God extends to you?

Are you someone who finds the problem of global hunger so overwhelming that you do nothing about it? Do you have analysis paralysis?

Are you in need of finding some sort of inner wholeness and healing?

Are you someone who has considerable wealth (by global standards) but who might be reluctant to share it?

When I'm at my best, I extend hospitality to the stranger in our midst...but there are times when I'm not as intentional about that as I should be.

There are times when I react like Peter, saying "how could we even think about tackling such a huge problem that with the means we have at our disposal!?" When I'm at my best, I see a world full of possibilities.

And sometimes I see myself as the boy holding all the goods...the fishes and loaves that are given over for the good of people I don't even know. There are plenty of times when I think about my own well being and my family's before I think of the greater good. And when I'm at my best, I can think of the larger whole and get outside my own narrow sense of scarcity and need to see the big picture.

None of us is at our best all the time, but if we're intentional about engaging the biblical witness and working with the stories of our faith, we can increase the frequency with which we act out of a sense of compassion and abundance, rather than self-centeredness and scarcity.



Would you *laugh* if Jesus told you he could feed 5,000 people with six loaves and two fish? Would you *laugh* if someone told you that we could end global hunger? Would that be a greater miracle than feeding those 5,000 people on a hillside. (Here is your chance to laugh.) We can end hunger on this planet if we have the will to make it happen.

We need to do what Bill and Melinda Gates are doing: changing the world by going after the root causes of poverty and hunger in the developing world. (And it takes a lot for someone who has been using a Macintosh for more than 20 years to say something nice about Bill Gates, other than that his parents are members of University Congregational UCC in Seattle.) The root causes of hunger in the developing world are disease, education, sustainable agriculture and rural development, the underclass status of women, international debt relief, and the prohibition or unavailability of birth control and family planning education. Each of those factor...every last one...is a solvable problem.

It doesn't work if we just feed the hungry today and ignore the root causes, because those same people are going to be hungry again tomorrow. If we don't look at the root causes and go after them to change the system, we essentially doom the developing world to dependency on our sense of pity. We can pat ourselves on the back for giving cans of food or writing a check to the Food Bank of Larimer County, but doing that can make us feel as if "we've done our part," which can make us complacent about doing the hard work of tackling root causes and funding ways to ensure that folks rarely, if ever, need the Food Bank.

There is an organization I commend to you, and some of you are already familiar with it: Bread for the World. "In October 1972, a small group of Catholics and

Protestants met to reflect on how persons of faith could be mobilized to influence U.S. policies that address *the causes of hunger*. Under the leadership of the Reverend Arthur Simon, the group began to test the idea in the spring of 1974. By year's end, more than 500 people had joined the ranks of Bread for the World as citizen advocates for hungry people. This small group has grown to a nationwide movement of more than 56,000 members.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, Bread for the World is Christians who lobby against the causes of world hunger.

Here are some statistics that you might find shockingly meaningful, but only if you realize that the numbers represent the lives of God's beloved children. Unlike Jesus seeing 5,000 people coming up the hillside, you don't get to see the faces of these millions of people, each one of whom is a child of God.

- "852 million people across the world are hungry, up from 842 million a year ago.
- Every day, more than 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes--one child every five seconds.<sup>3</sup>
- In essence, hunger is the most extreme form of poverty, where individuals or families cannot afford to meet their most basic need for food
- Hunger manifests itself in many ways other than starvation and famine. Most poor people who battle hunger deal with chronic undernourishment and vitamin or mineral deficiencies, which result in stunted growth, weakness and heightened susceptibility to illness.
- Countries in which a large portion of the population battles hunger daily are usually poor and often lack the social safety nets we enjoy, such as soup kitchens, food stamps, and job training programs. When a family that lives in a poor country cannot grow enough food or earn enough money to buy food, there is nowhere to turn for help."<sup>3</sup>

Let me reiterate: the root problems behind hunger are solvable.



I recently read an op-ed piece in the Christian Science Monitor by the recently retired director of CARE, Peter Bell, and I want you to hear what he wrote: "Two years ago, one of CARE's most generous donors bequeathed millions of dollars to fund girls' and basic education, mainly in poor African countries. She said she wanted not to give back, but to "give forward," to set the stage for a better world for her children and grandchildren. Increasingly other wealthy individuals, celebrities, and average citizens share this vision of making poverty a thing of the past. It is this kind of citizen involvement that will give traction to the expressed commitments of political leaders at G-8 meetings and UN conferences.

People in the developing world need those of us living in wealthy countries to be their advocates with our governments. They look to us to amplify their voices on policies that affect them, whether in agriculture, health, economic development, land use, trade, or violent conflict. The US government is already responding... But we still have a ways to go... Too many members of Congress play out their ideological and theological positions when voting on reproductive health and family planning. They impede poverty reduction. And far too many Americans remain complacent or overly absorbed in their

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<sup>2</sup> background from [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)

<sup>3</sup> source: [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)

own lives. They do not realize the difference they can make. Complacency and inaction here are powerful accomplices of extreme poverty in Africa.

Extreme poverty - and the suffering it causes - is an assault on people's basic dignity; and we can stop it. Each of us can do something - donate, volunteer, advocate.

I leave my post at CARE steadfast in the conviction that the world can be made better. We already have the knowledge, technology, and wealth to end extreme poverty; all we need is the political will. I believe that people in poor communities, governments, corporations, aid agencies, donors, and ordinary citizens will deepen our partnership to "give forward." Together, we can and will make our world stronger, safer, and more caring."<sup>4</sup>



I am going to end this sermon with two things: homework and a challenge.

Your homework is to get on the web and visit the Bread for the World website. (Take one of those pencils from the pew rack and write down this address on your bulletin, and take it home.) The address is [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org). Consider Jesus and the feeding of the 5,000 as you read about what **you** can do today.

And second, I challenge you as a congregation and the Social Concerns Committee as leadership, to engage in Bread for the World's campaign of letters this fall. We have a voice and a witness to put forward. God's world is one of abundance, but it also must be a world in which we support one another. That is God's intention for the world, and it is God's intention for each of his beloved children.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Science Monitor, March 22, 2006