

Isaiah 58:6-11
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 14, 2007

The Right to Food

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house . . . *Isaiah 58:7a*

I do not mean there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. *2 Corinthians 8:13-14*

A severe famine had struck Palestine, and the young Christian community in Jerusalem and beyond was in great distress for lack of food. Corinth, meanwhile, to whom Paul was writing, was a thriving port city with considerable wealth, and the apostle appeals to his Corinthian church for support of their brothers and sisters in Christ in those desperate times. When he makes the point “so that their abundance may be for your need,” he is saying that should their fortunes be reversed in the future, the Jerusalem Christians will not be slow to respond with like generosity. He appeals to the universal knowledge that, given time, life does indeed come full circle.

This coming Wednesday is World Food Day.

Access to food cannot ever be considered a privilege while some have and others starve. That food is a basic human right, has been self evident since the dawn of time. It became one of the human rights fundamentals in the United Nation's 1948 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” signed by over 140 nations.

The very issue of the right to food seems so misplaced among the citizens of the richest nation on earth. Death by starvation in the United States is a rarity. In fact when I did some research on the topic for the U.S.A., the only references that I could discover were about the 2003 Terri Schiavo case, the Florida invalid, or the plight of five wild burros (horses) in a remote area of southern Nevada, or Supreme Court rulings over euthanasia.

Nevertheless, in the fifty seconds or so that I have been speaking, ten *children* have died around the world, one every five seconds. If this morning's congregation represented the most critical starving children in the world, we would

all be dead before the end of this brief message. This is where the “right to food” becomes most compelling.

This week’s Old Testament lesson stands in bold relief in light of such facts as these. Ancient Israel—but not Israel only, this is a very contemporary word through Isaiah—is held up by God as apostate for disregarding the needs of the poor. I urge you to read the whole of chapter fifty-eight. God accuses the landowners of serving their own interests on the very fast days that they continue oppressing their workers. Such penitence and self interested prayer, God says, will not be heard in heaven. It is not to lie in sackcloth and ashes, says God of their prayers and fasting. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your kin—that is, your fellow human beings.

Huge part of the problem of our age of the lack of “fair balance,” as the apostle Paul calls it, is caught up in a deep irony. On the one hand we are more visually in touch with suffering unto death from genocide in Darfur, famine in Namibia, and earthquake in the mountain villages of Kashmir (northern Pakistan) Yet at the same time we have virtually lost our reverence for food, its sacredness as an absolute necessity. We more often struggle with the consequences of too much intake, almost never with the implications of too little. Food is so pervasively present for us, so conveniently available. By which I mean that we are no longer part of the stream of labor and process that brings food to our table. We no longer plow the earth or sow the seed, tend the rows, or reap the grain, irrigate the land by digging trenches. We do not personally pray over the harvest—do you recall Jean Francois Millet’s touching scene in his painting, “The Angelus”? A young rural couple stand in the early dawn in the midst of a sparsely planted field, offering a prayer. She with head deeply bowed, hands firmly clasped in prayerful devotion; he two awkward paces away, toying with his cap. Between them, a wicker basket with a few seed potatoes. We do not stack and bind or mill the grain. We seldom mix and kneed and pummel the dough, or stand mystified at its rising, or bake and serve its womb-like warmth and fragrance, or break its crackling skin, or pass a piece to break with a table companion. “A good meal,” wrote Arthur Pendenys, “makes a man feel more charitable to the whole world than any sermon.”

Whenever you take bread and hold it in our hands, you hold up the whole earth in a communion, something sacramental. A sacrament is something that makes tangible the presence of God. As the irrepressible Gandhi put it, “To millions who have to go without two meals a day, the only acceptable way in which God may appear, is food.” Which is precisely how Jesus made himself to a famished multitude far from their villages at the end of a long day (as we learned last week.). So significant was it that Jesus be the “bread giver,” the life giver—“I

am the bread of life” (John 6:35), that the very town in which he was born, by tradition Bethlehem, means “house of bread” or “city of bread.”

For most of humanity food is their daily life; the lack of it, their death. say a prayer when you eat bread.

So essential is food for our wellbeing that, when Jane and I were in China last April, we discovered the common daily greeting when Chinese meet is, “Have you eaten rice yet?”

What can we do to make a difference? Consider some of the following ideas; your own imagination can add others.

- At a family wedding—you know that the dozens, perhaps hundreds of guests will be spending lavishly on gifts, many of which might be used only occasionally (some not at all). So in the spirit of the one for whom we are named, in place of a material gift consider naming a donation for the poor in honor of the couple, through some agency like a food bank or hunger relief agency. Conversely, some couples, instead of favors at each place setting, leave a card saying that in the guests name a monetary gift has been made by the bride and groom (or their families) to some compelling cause, such as hunger relief.
- In China, where wedding gifts are predominantly monetary, we learned that many couples fund the planting of two trees. Trees create welcome shade, and thereby help retain moisture in the soil. They also act as wind breaks, so slowing erosion and making for more productive land, which in turn eases famine and feeds the hungry.
- Wouldn't it make a statement if, on our annual 1040 form, instead of asking if we'd like to donate \$3 to the presidential election fund, the IRS asked if we'd like to make that donation to the starving children of the world. It would create a fund far more compelling than the spending of half a million dollars for a thirty second sound commercial (during which six more starving children die). The contrast is quite obscene. Not incidentally, in 1992 when the “donation” was just \$1, the two main parties each received \$50 million. Imagine what it is now! And the Bible gets accused of being irrelevant!

Your abundance *can* appease their lack, and their great need can be your gratification.

Amen