

**“What if?”**

In the Gospel of Luke, we often find Jesus at a table. He’s fairly indiscriminate with whom he eats, which of course, gets him in a whole lot of trouble with the religious authorities. But its *at* the table where we are often introduced to some of his most profound and upside-down kingdom teaching. In today’s scripture Jesus is having a Sabbath meal at the home of one of those religious authorities - a Pharisee. We can surmise that there may have been other religious leaders at the meal as well. The Pharisees have made it their mission to watch Jesus carefully, looking for any opportunity to find fault with him, any hint of blasphemy. Jesus does not disappoint them. Right in front of their Sabbath-abiding noses, he heals a man with a massive accumulation of fluid- a condition known as dropsy. And, if that weren’t enough sinful Sabbath turmoil, he proceeds to tell the host and guests two confusing parables: a banquet story about humility and another about a great dinner where the invited guests refuse to attend.

The first of these two parables is interpreted as a warning and admonition to those who want to be exalted above others. Beware, Jesus says, for when you exalt yourself, you will be brought low. But when you humble yourself you will be given a place of honor. We recall Jesus’ similar words in Matthew 19: The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

The second parable tells of a host who gives a large and lavish dinner party for his friends. But... the friends decline the invitation. By the end of the parable we – who have the luxury of scholarly hindsight - know that Jesus is the host of banquet of good news, but, because the Jews are not recognizing the Messiah, God’s good news will be spread out to the roads and lanes to those not originally invited to the table – to the Gentiles.

As you know, this fall we are exploring both the spiritual and physical sides of hunger,

weaving into the sermon series that Jesus is the Bread of Life – the spiritual; and that hunger – the lack of physical bread – is a justice issue. Tucked into the middle of this morning’s scripture from Luke we can expand the meaning of these parables to find amazing directives as we explore “bread justice.”

“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Luke 14:12 and 13.

“Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. The servant said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” The master replied, “Go out again into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in.” Luke 14:21-23.

Is Jesus only describing the future spread of the gospel message to the non-Jewish world? Perhaps, but perhaps not. He is speaking, after all, in the parabolic form he often uses to make people think, to obscure what he is really saying, to mask the multiple truths in a story. Perhaps one of the multiple truths in these two table teachings is that these are words of justice, words of *hunger* justice.

Don’t just share food with those whom you know, with whom you are already friendly. Welcome and extend the table to those who are hungry, truly hungry.

Nothing tugs at our heart strings quite as much as photos of children who are hungry – with their watery, blank stares and extended bellies. We want to reach into the photo and make their pain stop.

In World War 2, Jewish children in concentration camps were taught to push their fists hard into their stomachs or tie ropes tightly around their torsos so that the pain from their fists or ropes superseded the pain from having little to eat.

Yesterday, throughout the world, 20,000 to 35,000 people died of starvation – the

number varies between reporting agencies. Approximately 240 children in the world will die from hunger related causes during this sermon. But, as we know, the hungry are not just in pictures, in concentration camps, or in statistics from somewhere out there.

- In the US 1 in 10 households live in hunger;
- Closer to home, the Eastern Illinois Foodbank served 45,000 people in 14 counties - just in the month of July.
- And in Champaign county, 18.7% of the children live in extreme poverty.

Hunger is next door. Years ago, in an earlier sermon, I told a story about our next door neighbors, and I retell it now because it puts a reality to hunger in a way that statistics and pictures cannot do. It puts a face – a real live face - to hunger.

When our daughters were young, it was a tradition for us to bake and decorate Valentine cookies to deliver to friends, relatives, teachers, and neighbors. On red plates we piled heart shaped cookies of all sizes, smeared with white or pink icing and overly decorated with sprinkles and red hots and little heart-shaped candies. Our neighbors next door had five children, so we took them several dozen of our cookie creations. We didn't know them very well – they had just moved to Champaign a few months before Valentines' Day, but our girls had played with their children on pleasant fall days and looked forward to doing that again in the spring. But, in early May, the mother of the family came to our door and asked us if we would mind if a moving van parked in front of our house for a few days. She explained that they were moving back to Minnesota. Her husband's job at the University hadn't worked out, the pay and the hours fell far short of what had been promised. They couldn't afford to stay any longer and were going to live with relatives until they found other work. I told her I was sorry, that our children would miss playing with her children, and I hoped things would be better soon. Tears welled up in her eyes as she said goodbye, and then, as she turned to leave, she said, "Do you remember those cookies you brought us on Valentine's Day? Thank you so much. Those cookies were the only thing my children had to eat for two

days.”

I clearly missed “the boat.” Twenty feet away from where my cupboards were stocked and the refrigerator was full, five children and two adults shared a plate of cookies as their only food for two days.

When I taught music in the public schools – and I know the teachers and teacher’s aides among us will resonate with this - I encountered children who could not focus on learning because they couldn’t stop focusing on the emptiness in their stomachs; children who had learning and developmental disabilities because they had inadequate nutrition in their formative years; children who came to school every day without breakfast and whose lunch consisted of no more than an inexpensive Little Debbie oatmeal pie with a freshness date long expired. I now work where it is routine to answer the back door of the church to a plea of “I’m hungry, can you help me?”

The problem of hunger – as we all know - is complicated, pervasive, and widespread. There are students within blocks of our church who must choose between books or food. There are seniors in our community who must choose between winter heat or food. There are people we pass on the sidewalk who must choose between medicine or food. There are likely – if the statistics are to be trusted – someone here this morning who has made – or will have to make - some of those same tough choices.

Jesus says we are to go out into the streets and lanes and invite the hungry to dinner. He says, don’t keep inviting your friends to dinner, the ones who you know will ultimately invite you back. No, invite those who are needy and have no means to invite you back. Go out of your comfort zone, Jesus is saying. Extend hospitality to those with whom you are uncomfortable. The host in the parable was willing to go out of his comfort zone to surround himself with the sick and the poor. The newly invited guests were unclean in the religious sense, and perhaps in the literal sense as well, and by interacting with them, he was risking his own religious cleanliness. But he invited them to dinner anyway.

September has been declared by several national agencies who deal with hunger as ***Hunger Action Month***. In recognition of that, there was a panel presentation about hunger at the Champaign Public Library on Tuesday evening. Several people from First Mennonite attended, and will recognize that some of the statistics in the message are from the information shared that evening.

I came away from that panel discussion depressed and hopeful, inspired and challenged. ***Depressed*** because the problem of hunger, especially in this present economy, is growing by leaps and bounds; ***hopeful*** because so many good people are so committed to making a difference in the lives of the hungry; ***inspired*** by the stories of those who serve the hungry; and ***challenged*** by what ***we*** can do about hunger.

In our MYF Sunday School room we have a book called *What If?* Inside are questions to get youth thinking and talking. Questions such as...What if you could go back in time and change one decision you made in your life? Or, what if you were selling a car which you knew had something was wrong with it? Would you reveal that to a potential buyer?

Since the meeting on Tuesday evening, I have been thinking about hunger and “What if?” questions. I close by sharing a few of these rhetorical musings; with the intense hope and fervent prayer that they do not remain ***just*** rhetorical.

- What if every time we went to the grocery store, we took 10% of the money we spent on ourselves and gave that amount in cash or food items to the food pantry here at FMC?
- What if so many people became inspired by Tom’s food delivery presentation that we had to increase our monthly deliveries from 2 to 4 or 5 to accommodate all those who wanted to volunteer?
- What if so many food contributions were brought to our food pantry that they no longer could be contained in the young adult Sunday School room?

- Last week you heard that our Colombia Church Group asked the congregation for a small monthly increase for feeding the children at our sister church's food program. What if someone had jumped up in sharing and said, "wait a minute! Can't we give more than that!?"
- What if we chose to contribute an amount equal to what we spend eating out every week to the food pantry every week?
- What if we actively sought out hunger alleviation projects that were already underway through Mennonite Central Committee, Bread for the World, Heifer International, or Eastern Illinois Foodbank and, instead of giving Christmas gifts this year, donated an amount equal to what we might have spent to one of those agencies?
- What if we skipped one meal per week in solidarity around the issue of hunger and then contributed the money that meal would have cost to the Eastern Illinois Foodbank or to our food pantry?
- What if each small group at FMC got together once this year and prepared a meal for 80 people and then delivered it to the soup kitchen at St. Jude's Catholic Worker House – a place where several of you already volunteer?
- What if, at our next potluck, we "paid" for the meal and gave the proceeds to our food pantry?
- What if we tried eating for an entire day on \$3.45, the amount per day that an average food stamp recipient receives?
- What if, when Lynne Sancken calls for soup donations for the TIMES Center, she can't find enough buckets to put all the gallons of soup this congregation donates?
- What if we volunteered at the TIMES Center or Catholic Worker House or Eastern Illinois Foodbank on a regular basis?
- What if every child and teenager in the congregation – without being prompted by a parent – decided to bring something to the food pantry from their allowance or birthday money?

- What if we, as individuals or as a congregation, decided to send \$150 to the Regional Office of Education for Champaign and Ford Counties for their Backpack Program; where 100% of the money will go towards providing a homeless child a bag of food in her or his backpack once a week for the entire school year?
- What if we kept our eyes and ears open to identify the hungry in this congregation or in this 900 block of W. Springfield or in our classrooms and neighborhoods, and instead of giving them food or money - which of course is a wonderful thing to do - actually invited them to *our* table for dinner?

The host's friends who had been invited to his party had a variety of excuses why they could not attend: Sometimes our excuses for not addressing the needs of the hungry more willingly and more passionately seem about as shallow as the excuses of the guests who refused to go to the dinner party. Sometimes the problem of hunger seems so overwhelming that we do nothing from a sense that we can't possibly make any difference.

But Jesus is clear in Matthew 25 when he says: "I was hungry and you fed me." The righteous are confused and ask him, "when did we see you hungry?" Jesus answers: "I tell you, just as you gave food to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you gave it to me." This congregation is extraordinarily generous, and I honestly can see almost any of my "what if" questions being answered with action. With that generosity of spirit and will, we can "step up to the plate." We can move out of our comfort zone- as did the host in the parable - and address the needs of the hungry; to offer a loaf of bread in the name of Jesus?

**Response:** This morning in lieu of a response hymn, we will joyfully bring forward food and money for our food pantry. If you did not receive the email message or read

about this in the bulletin last week, bring the loose change in your pocket or purse. If you did bring food and see someone around you who did not, share...so that all may come forward in a commitment to be more mindful of the hungry among us. When all the donations have been given, Tom Anderson will pray a blessing upon this food and upon the people who will ultimately receive it.