

FEED MY SHEEP
John 21: 4-17
First Mennonite Church
November 23, 2008
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Since we began our Bread worship series ten weeks ago, more than 1.1 million children have died from hunger-related causes. *Lord, have mercy.*

It's heartbreaking to see and say these numbers. I sat last evening with pencil and paper and did the arithmetic – 16,000 daily deaths times seventy days. When I placed the commas and saw that it was more than 1 million, I caught my breath. Surely an extra zero had crept in? I multiplied again. No, the math was right though the reality was terribly wrong: 1,120,000 children dead since September 14, because they hadn't gotten enough food. Tears sprang to my eyes. *Lord, have mercy.*

Today, 153 million children under the age of 5 are malnourished. Their physical, mental, and emotional well-being is severely compromised. Some won't survive to adulthood. *Lord, have mercy.*

In the United States, 12 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. *Lord, have mercy*

Lord, have mercy on those who suffer from hunger and its consequences. Lord, have mercy on all those who have enough and more than enough and fail to respond.

There's an old Scottish prayer that goes, "Dear Lord, give bread to the hungry, and hunger of Thee to those who have bread."

"Give bread to the hungry, and hunger of Thee to those who have bread." This pithy petition is exactly right. It captures the cycle of physical and spiritual feeding that Jesus anticipates in today's Scripture text.

John's Gospel narrative is coming to an end. Chapter 21 describes Jesus' third and final resurrection appearance to the disciples. The setting is the Sea of Tiberias, otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee, the body of water that has figured prominently in Jesus' ministry. Significantly, we are back at the same location where Jesus fed the multitude with bread and fish. And we are close by Capernaum, the village of Simon Peter, where in the synagogue Jesus delivered the Bread of Life sermon the day after the feeding of the 5,000. Here at the end of the Gospel of John—and at the end of our fall worship series, we return to the setting and bread themes of John 6, which Cindy and I each preached on earlier.

In this culminating teaching about faith and discipleship, the bread of life and bread justice themes unite.

Since we looking backwards today anyway, let's begin at the end, with the charge Jesus gives to Simon Peter. Remember that Peter is the natural leader of the disciple group. On this occasion, he is the one who takes the initiative for their fishing expedition. And with his eager plunge into the water, he is the one who leads the way to breakfast with Jesus.

Eager Peter also bears the guilt of having denied the Lord three times on the night when Jesus was arrested. The charcoal fire Jesus has built on the beach recalls that dark, cold night, for just such a fire burned in the courtyard of the high priest's house, where Peter stood with the servants and officials (John 18:18), while Jesus was interrogated. Thus, when Jesus asks Peter three times about Peter's love for him (John 21: 15-17), the questioning serves both to mirror and to reverse the three denials. Jesus doesn't dwell on the sins of the past, rather he offers reconciliation, first through the shared meal—a variant of other occasions when he breaks bread with sinners, and then through the verbal exchange. Jesus elicits Peter's declaration of love and directs his future behavior.

What does Jesus require of Peter? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. The wording varies slightly, but the message is identical: *Nurture and nourish my people.*

In fact, the whole story is about nourishment.

Verse 4 depicts the daybreak moment when Jesus is seen on the shore of the lake. The disciples have just spent a long, wearying, frustrating night on the water. Although they went fishing at what they know to be the prime time for a good catch, they have caught nothing. Not a single fish. Their nets are empty. They have labored in the dark, literally and figuratively.

What's the problem? Maybe all those months on the road with Jesus dulled their fishing skills. In that case, another night or two on the lake should do the trick. Or, is it something else? Are the disciples getting a final lesson in how to secure abundant life?

In response to their poverty and failure, the disciples hear prophetic words across the water: Cast your net on the *other* side of the boat! Immediately, the disciples discover that *on the other side lies great abundance.* They experience the miracle of the mighty catch, a catch so magnificent that it can't be brought onboard, but must be towed to shore.

Picture all that dynamic life teeming within the net—more fish, bigger fish than the disciples had ever caught. More fish than anyone had ever caught at one time in the Sea of Galilee, which is perhaps why John records the specific number of fish: 153.

With the abundant catch, the weary disciples spring into action! Once again, they have a point of reference and a direction. They claim their Lord and move with great energy toward Jesus.

Peter, the impetuous man of action, can't wait for the boat. He jumps into the water and swims to Jesus. The biggest fish of all! Caught by the power of Jesus' love!

On the shore, a meal of grilled fish and bread awaits. The disciples add fish from the bountiful catch to the communion meal. They enjoy food and fellowship in the presence of the risen Lord. No doubt they recall the last time they were all together by the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus fed 5,000 men and at least that many women and children, with five loaves and two fish.

When the disciples acknowledge Jesus' presence and his call on their lives, they gain direction, energy, and food. They are nourished, in body, mind, and spirit. What a transformation they experience as the new day dawns!

Peter and the others now begin to understand what it means to follow a resurrected Lord, a Lord who will always be present and always be guiding them toward new and abundant life. Jesus, the Bread of Life, the Word of God incarnate.

The disciples are also recognizing their own part in this life-giving cycle. The presence of the material food—the fish in the sea and the bread to be broken—is likewise God's gift. But the disciples have a critical role to play in the food's preservation and distribution. At the feeding of the multitude, they send the food among the crowd and gather up the leftovers. On the fishing expedition, they cast the net in faith and then not only tow and haul the catch to shore, but also add fish to the fire, as Jesus asks them.

By the time the command to "Feed my sheep" is given, the way has been prepared. Feeding others has already been organically linked to the gift of spiritual bread and has been practiced as acts of discipleship.

Some readers and scholars get hung up on the fact that the Gospel writer abruptly shifts metaphors, from catching fish to tending sheep. Honestly, I don't see that as a point of concern. There's a unifying theme of nurture and nourishment. Moreover, there are compelling Scriptural echoes that enrich the interpretation. In Ezekiel 34, the Lord God critiques shepherds who have neglected the care of God's flock and prioritized the filing of their own mouths:

Ezekiel 34:10 Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

In contrast, remember the wonderful analogy Jesus offers in John 10, "I am the good shepherd." With Jesus' command to Peter to "feed my sheep," he commissions a new order of shepherds, one that is other-focused and prepared for self-sacrifice and renounces selfish gratification.

Now let's meet a present-day Peter.

Sara Miles has quite a conversion story. She tells it in a memoir published in 2007, with the fitting title *Take This Bread*. Sara grew up in a family antagonistic to Christianity. She traveled widely, cooked for a living, did research in Nicaragua, had a child, settled in San Francisco, and one Sunday, at the age of 46, impulsively dropped into worship at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, never having said the Lord's Prayer or heard a Gospel reading. Invited to the communion table, Sara took the bread and wine. She found herself eating Jesus and her life changed forever:

"That first communion knocked me upside-down. . . I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are

honored.”¹ “It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same.”²

Sara describes how hungry she grew for worship and for the communion bread that brought Jesus close, into her very body, and united her with the body of Christ. By the time she was baptized, Sara was ready to respond to Jesus’ after-meal command:

“That picture in the back of my head was getting clearer. It was communion, after all, but with free groceries instead of bread and wine. With the ‘everyone’ of ‘Jesus invites everyone to his table’ extended, so that more sinners and outcasts could share the feast. With the literal bread of life served from the same table as the bread of heaven. This is it, I thought, what I’m supposed to do: *Feed my sheep*. I phoned the food Bank and panicking slightly as the words left my mouth, introduced myself in a way I never had before, ‘I’m Sara Miles, from St. Gregory’s Church,’ I said, ‘I’d like to talk with someone about starting a food pantry.’”³

“So, over the objections of some of my fellow parishioners, I started a food pantry right in the church sanctuary, giving away literally tones of oranges and potatoes and Cheerios around the very same altar where I’d eaten the body of Christ. We gave food to anyone who showed up. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters, bishops—all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people.”⁴

Earlier this year (May 5, 2008), Sara contributed to the “This I Believe” series on NPR’s *All Things Considered*. She concluded her essay: “I learned that hunger can lead to more life—that by sharing real food I’d find communion with the most unlikely people; that by eating a piece of bread I’d experience myself as part of one body. This I believe: that by opening ourselves to strangers, we will taste God.”⁵

I pass along Sara’s story not to imply that we should start running a food pantry out of our sanctuary, but rather to encourage us to keep strengthening, in an intentional way, the connection between our tasting Jesus in the spiritual food of the Gospel, in praise-filled worship, and yes, in the communion bread—and our tasting Jesus again in the care and nurture of others. We conclude this worship series with, I trust, a clearer sense of some of the worthy opportunities available to us to impact the acute problem of hunger, through our service, prayers, advocacy, and financial contributions.

The Bread of Life is God’s precious gift. In response, we re-gift. This exchange of gifts circulates throughout the economy of grace. The economy of grace operates on the manna principle of enough for all. It functions like yeast dough, expanding and rising, generating hope. This economy is fueled by a unique spiritual fuel, one that multiplies through use, whose reserves never run dry, namely *love*.

The word Eucharist, used in various Christian traditions for the communion liturgy, means “thanksgiving.” In this Thanksgiving week, let us take time to thank God for every meal that graces our table. Let us pray in thanksgiving every time we fast, in order to make room for feeding our souls and

¹ Sara Miles, “Strangers Bring Us Closer to God,” as read on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*, May 5, 2008. Accessible on the NPR website; “This I Believe” series.

² Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), pp. xv-xvi.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 104-05.

⁴ Miles, “Strangers Bring Us Closer to God.”

⁵ *Ibid*.

feeding others. Finally, let us fervently pray in recognition of the thousands who daily perish from hunger:

Yes, Lord, we love you, you who loved us first and gave your life for us. Keep feeding us with the bread of life so that we might in turn feed your sheep. Amen.