

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UCC
The Rev. John Tamlilio III, Senior Pastor
Sunday, July 19, 2009 (Pentecost VII)

Sermon Title: "Bread for the World"
Scripture Lesson: John 6:1-21 and 2 Kings 4:42-44

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According to CARE, a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty:

- **More than 840 million people in the world are malnourished; 799 million of them live in the developing world. [That is about two-and-a-half times the population of the United States.]**
- **More than 153 million of the world's malnourished people are children under the age of 5. [That is the equivalent of about half the population of this country.]**
- **Six million children under the age of 5 die every year as a result of hunger.**
- **Malnutrition can severely affect a child's intellectual development. Malnourished children often have stunted growth and score significantly lower on math and language achievement tests than do well-nourished children.**
- **Lack of dietary diversity and essential minerals and vitamins also contributes to increased child and adult mortality. Vitamin A deficiency impairs the immune system, increasing the annual death toll from measles and other diseases by an estimated 1.3 million to 2.5 million children.**
- **While every country in the world has the potential of growing enough food to feed itself, 54 nations currently do not produce enough food to feed their populations, nor can they afford to import the necessary commodities to make up the gap. Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.**
- **Most of the widespread hunger in a world of plenty results from grinding, deeply rooted poverty. In any given year, however, between 5 and 10 percent of the total can be traced to specific events: droughts or floods, armed conflict, political, social and economic disruptions.**

Clearly, hunger is one of the greatest injustices in the world. It affects swathes of the globe's population. Twenty-five thousand people — adults and children — die every day from hunger and hunger related causes. In the course of 19 days, that equals the

population of Cleveland. Imagine the population of this city dying every three weeks because of hunger! That would be enough, I assume, to compel us to act immediately.

And yet, it *doesn't* compel us act, at least not enough. If we knew that a plague killed the population of this city every three weeks, we would pull out all the stops to cure it. Think of all the things that people have done to prevent swine flu, which isn't really that serious an ailment when compared to other strains of the flu virus and other diseases.

There are certainly things that we do. We give money to Neighbors in Need, One Great Hour of Sharing, and other UCC-related ministries that strive to end hunger around the world. We also give money to the Bradley Fund, which addresses some of the immediate needs of people in our community. (Footnote: unfortunately, the Bradley Fund is on-hold right now due to lack of funds.) Our Food Pantry is a blessing to those who cannot afford basic groceries in the Tremont neighborhood.

But are we not called to do more.

Last Wednesday, I was invited by Justice and Witness Ministries to preach at the weekly morning service at the National Offices of the United Church of Christ. The theme for the service was "Summer in the City." Basically, I was asked to reflect on the fact that summer is a time of rest and relaxation for most of us, but what about the poor who struggle for health care, food, and a place to live? They do not get a summer vacation.

I then asked, rhetorically, what am I doing to address the hunger issue? Yes, I give money to the church and some of that money is used to fund outreach endeavors that provide food for the hungry. Those efforts are spearheaded by our congregation, by our denomination, and by our ecumenical partners. I am part of several communities who are addressing the hunger issue. But the question remains: what have I done *personally* to tend to this issue?

I am talking about getting my hands dirty.

- There are soup kitchens that need a helping hand? How many hours do I volunteer per month to work at them?
- There are people scavenging for spare change on our streets. What have I done, other than giving them a couple of bucks? I have given many a fish, but have I taught anyone how to fish?

What have I done lately? Yes, I preach sermons such as these to inspire you (my flock) to act, but how successful have I been? You can ask yourselves the same questions that I asked myself. How often do you volunteer at soup kitchens and food pantries? What have you done, other than donating money (which, by the way, is *very* important), but what else have you done to assuage hunger in this community and beyond?

We need to look at the big picture. Hunger is rampant. It is out of control. Far too many people need our assistance. It is enough to make one give up hope, to say “My efforts really *won't* make a difference.” Jesus’ disciples said the same thing.

Jesus was at the lakeshore. His popularity had grown. Let’s face it: in a community that is hungry, sick, and oppressed, people will flock to anyone who offers food, healing, and liberation. That was Jesus in his day.

People gathered around looking for food, thousands of people — in some accounts it is five thousand people, in some it is four thousand. Interestingly enough, the loaves and the fishes is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels. Also, when Jesus seeks to feed the multitudes with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish he is told by his disciples, “It’s not going to work! We do not have enough food to feed all these people. Send them away so that they can find food elsewhere.”

Send them away. Isn’t that what we always say? We do not want the hungry in our neighborhood. Furthermore, we do not want to be burdened with such an impossible task: whether it is feeding thousands with five loaves and two fish or coming up with enough money to provide adequate food for everyone in our community who seeks it. It is a lot easier to throw our hands in the air and say, “We can’t do it!”

But Jesus saw things differently. Jesus didn’t settle for, “We can’t do it. We do not have enough food.”

Some people dismiss the loaves and fishes story, because they feel it is a fabrication. *It could not have happened.* That’s too easy. Whether this story is historically accurate or not, we need to look at the *poetry* of it — we need to look at the *real miracle* here. Maybe the miracle wasn’t feeding thousands with just a little bit of food. Maybe the real miracle was convincing the disciples that they needed to look beyond their limited vision to find ways of fulfilling Jesus’ ministry. Maybe the miracle was showing them that what they thought was impossible was actually doable: that they actually had it in their power to provide enough food for the indigent.

In reflecting on this passage, United Church of Christ scholar Gail O'Day says, "Jesus' glory is not revealed for power, but grace-filled pastoral care."¹ In other words, this passage is not intended to illustrate Jesus' clout; rather, it is an opportunity for him to provide support for those in need. I would argue that it is also intended to inspire us to do the same. It is a passage that asks us to look beyond our limited vision. It is a passage that challenges us to find doorways when all we see are walls. It is a passage that is designed to give us hope, when we think that everything is hopeless.

Feeding the hungry is a fundamental part of who we are as a church. Look at our covenant. It clearly states that we are called "to feed the hungry." Our food pantry, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the ways that we do this. If you have ever seen Dick Berlow in action, he does a lot with a couple loaves and a few fish. The Bradley Fund also serves a multitude of people in our community with minimal resources.

What else can we do? I do not come with answers today, my friends, I come with a question for all of us: what else can we do? People are still hungry. They need our assistance. I could stand here with a white board and a marker and have you shout out answers, and I was tempted to do that. Instead, I want you to put on your thinking caps. Take this question home with you. Talk about it with your family and friends. What more can Pilgrim do to live into our covenantal commitment to feed the hungry? You may come up with something very simple, or you may come up with some grandiose idea — one of those ideas that the disciples would have said, "No, it can't be done." Jesus teaches us to dream big. What else can we do?

Once you have an idea, I would love for you to send it to me. Send me an e-mail, write me a letter, give me a call, stop by my office: whatever you prefer. I will share these ideas with Mission Empowerment and with all of you in a future sermon.

In the meantime, look for opportunities that are all around you to reach out and feed the hungry. Those opportunities abound. Latch onto them. Make a difference. Be the ripple in the pool of water that will eventually turn into a tidal wave and will wash hunger off the face of the earth. It will take us acting individually, and it will take us acting together. May we do both with the light of God as our guide. May we be bread for the world. Amen.

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," from *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 597.

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
The Rev. John Tamlino III, Senior Pastor
Sunday, August 2, 2009 (Pentecost IX)

Sermon: "Bread of Life"
Scripture Lesson: Exodus 12: 2-4, 9-15

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Remember that old Burger King commercial from the '70s? The slogan was, "Have it your way." Burger King wanted their customers to know that they could have their burgers prepared anyway they wanted: cheese, pickles, onions, catsup, mustard — you name it. Why? Because the customer is *always* right! As consumers in a free market, capitalist economy we feel as if we are entitled to a whole host of things. This is the case with fast food and everything else that both franchised and mom-and-pop stores have to offer.

- "So what if Third World child labor is used to manufacture the clothing we buy for pennies on the dollar at Wal*Mart. I want a bargain! It's all about me."
- "I have every right to complain about paying my water bill. The fact that many people have to walk miles to gather a bucket of well-water in sub Sahara, Africa isn't my problem. I'm an American! I deserve the best."

We complain when we don't get things our way. Such a way of thinking puts *self* before everyone else. As I have mentioned before, this is contractual thinking: a contract is used to protect my best interests. If you get your end of the bargain, that's all well and good...as long as you do not take what is due to me, because, in the end, it's all about me.

Yahweh led the Israelites out of slavery to establish a covenant with them. Through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Yahweh sought to establish a special relationship with the chosen people. It wasn't because they were more numerous or more powerful than other nations. In fact, it was the converse. God chose the Israelites for a special covenantal relationship *in spite* of their shortcomings.

There's that word *covenant* again. Israel was chosen to live in covenant with Yahweh and one another. This meant that they could *not* have it their way. And yet, having it their way was exactly what Israel expected. "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of

bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” When they did not find a Burger King that was ready to cater to their needs, they did what we all do: they started complaining.

But Yahweh was faithful to the covenant. Israel was not led out into the wilderness to die. They were hungry and food was provided: in the morning a misty, bready substance appeared on the ground and quail was provided for meat. By offering this food, the people were put to the test: they were given enough food for *one day*. They could not hoard food or it would spoil, and yet many of them did just that. Was it that they didn’t trust God or was it that they wanted things on their own terms? “Who cares if God told us to only gather enough food for *one day*? We will gather and store as much as we want, thank you very much. It’s all about us.”

These reflections seek to establish the fact that this passage from the Exodus narrative lifts up many interesting themes: being self-centered rather than thinking about what is best for the entire community; trusting our own devices rather than having faith in God and our fellow sojourners. It’s all there.

I am a big fan of *The Twilight Zone*: not the new fangled series — the black and white one featuring Rod Serling from the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. I remember one episode entitled “The Shelter” in which four couples gather in the house of a neighbor to celebrate his birthday. The guest of honor has a bomb shelter in his basement. It just so happens that a report of an imminent nuclear attack comes over the radio. It is every man, woman, and child for themselves. In the course of the episode, the other dinner guests try to gain entry into their friend’s fallout shelter, but to no avail. In the process, each person, who is thinking only of themselves and their respective families, becomes ugly and barbaric. They say and do things that they would never imagine they were capable of during normal circumstances. In pure *Twilight Zone* fashion it turns out that the bomb threat was a false alarm. The overjoyed and relieved friends try to reconcile, but the guest of honor reflects that by seeing their true selves, it is impossible to be normal again. “Normal. I don’t know. I don’t know what normal is,” he says. “I thought I did once. I don’t anymore...We were spared a bomb tonight, but I wonder — I wonder if we weren’t destroyed even without it.”

The point? When we boil it all down, we think about *numero uno*. The needs of others is secondary, at best. We want what we want when we want it. We do not want manna and quail. We want fresh baked rolls and prime rib. We won’t settle for being led on a long trek to the Promised Land from a land of enslavement. We want a suite at the Four Seasons, because we think that is what we deserve. (That’s what all the commercials tell us, anyway.) Furthermore, we do not want to follow the rules.

We will gather as much food as we want, because we either do not trust that God will provide for us the next day or we want to store a surplus for ourselves and *our* families. We want to live in our own fallout shelters with just our kin and a mountain of provisions.

God's way is very different.

It begins in community. The focus is not on our selfish wants and needs. God's community is one in which the welfare of our sisters and brothers is intricately connected to our welfare. Furthermore, united in covenant, we are called to trust that God will provide everything we need for our corporate survival. We fail to trust God when we feel our survival is contingent upon mass consumerism. We fail to trust God when we label the stranger or alien as "other" and keep them at arm's length from *our* community.

The truth of the matter is that all of us are wandering in the desert. We are only here for a short time, and life is hard enough. Death, disease, economic instability, heartache, hungers of all kinds — our existence is wrought with all kinds of impediments. To face it in isolation is to make life intolerable. We are to walk this journey with one another, lending a hand of compassion whenever we can. We are to walk this journey with God, in full faith that if we turn our troubles over to God that God will transform them into amazing possibilities; in full faith that our survival is not only contingent upon the work of our hands alone. We will be led by an outstretched arm and a mighty hand.

Today's reading speaks of bread for the journey. In a moment we will share the bread and the cup of the Eucharist. It is no coincidence that both the bread of Communion and the Church are referred to as "the body of Christ" in Scripture. That is no mistake at all. I believe the subtlety here is that by being fed by *the body*, we become *the body* and, in turn, are called to reach out to feed others: physically and spiritually.

That is what this is all about. That is really the point of my rantings this morning. It isn't about us. It is about God and those with whom we travel this faith journey.

We need a reorientation. Instead of beginning the day by looking in the *mirror*, maybe we should look out the *window* instead to see what is going on in the lives of others, to see where we are needed. Having slept through the night on a comfortable bed with a belly full of food, we need to look into the eyes of those who faced sleepless

nights (for a variety of reasons) and hunger pains (of various kinds). We need to join them on their sojourn to the Promised Land, because we will not get there alone. But walking together, hand-in-hand, we will be led by God into a land of infinite possibility.

I leave you with these words, the poem that concludes Kate Sopko's book *Stewards of the Lost Lands*. Kate, as you know, is one of our custodians and she is a gifted writer. Kate writes,

**Manmade borders are real only in their consequences
and in the intent they were built to serve.**

**Topple the consequences and vast frontiers will stand in their place.
Topple the intent and vast frontiers will stand.¹**

Amen.

¹ "This Limbo" by Kate Sopko. From *Stewards of the Lost Lands* (Cleveland: The Language Foundry, 2008).