



815 Million Hungry Neighbors

James 2:14-26

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World Hunger Day

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What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you don't supply their bodily needs, what's the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:14-26

Ministers love to preach at Advent, Easter, and Pentecost. On the great majority of Sundays it is more fun to be the preacher than the preachee. But this is not one of the fun Sundays. This is World Hunger Day.

Preachers across America are trying to make themselves feel better about the way we usually ignore so much of what we claim to believe. Ministers—who do not do nearly enough for the hungry—are reluctant to preach about it. This is the service where we pay long overdue—but not nearly sufficient attention—to this central challenge to our faith.

On World Hunger Day, preachers deal with their guilty consciences by doing three things. First, we point out that it is hard to talk about hunger, because the problem is overwhelming. Of the seven billion people in the world, about 815 million are malnourished. They are too weak to lead productive lives. Their intake of calories is insufficient to keep them from illnesses (*Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*).

Around 21,000 people die every day from hunger-related diseases. This is more than the equivalent of a jumbo jet crashing every hour, every day. Two-thirds of those who die are children under the age of five. Seven out of ten are female. The numbers are devastating.

One of the few things more painful to look at than the statistics are the faces. Hunger is not a number. Hunger is a

twenty-five-year-old mother named Kim who works at a factory in Vietnam, ten hours a day, seven days a week, earning eight cents an hour making promotional toys for McDonald's Happy Meals. Hunger is her four-year-old daughter starving, because no matter how hard they work, no one in the family makes a living wage. The needs of hungry people should take our breath away.

The second thing preachers say on World Hunger Day is, "It's not my fault we're talking about this. It's the Bible." The Bible repeats God's demand that we share our wealth over and over. By one count, there are three thousand verses about caring for the poor. If the subjects of sermons were in proportion to the amount of attention those subjects are given in scripture, then there would be twenty times as many sermons on sharing our money with starving people.

The Hebrew farmer was commanded to leave some of the harvest for those who have no farm. Deuteronomy says that what we have belongs to the immigrant, orphan, and widow. Ezekiel insists God demolished Sodom and Gomorrah because they did not share with the poor. Amos threatened Israel, "If you don't help the poor, God will make you an orphan." Amos was never the Senior Minister of a wealthy congregation.

Jesus told of a poor man who ate the crumbs from a rich man's table. When both died, Lazarus went to glory and Dives was damned. The rich person was separated from God, because he did not share what he had been given. Most ministers avoid repeating Jesus' condemnation of the rich for ignoring the poor.

I grew up in churches where everybody said they believed the Bible. We had Bible drills—races to see who could find Habakkuk first. We enjoyed saying, "I believe the Bible from Genesis to the maps in the back." We had

bumper stickers that proclaimed: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

When I was seventeen years old, my church had an annual youth-led worship service. I was the only male my age willing to preach. That was more than enough qualification.

I chose to speak on Matthew 25, where Jesus talks about the final judgment. Jesus tells the goats that they are going to hell because they have not fed the hungry. He tells the sheep who have fed the hungry that they will spend eternity with God. As a seventeen-year-old who knew no better I said, “In this passage, Jesus tells the goats that they are going to hell because they have not fed the hungry. He tells the sheep who have fed the hungry that they will spend eternity with God.”

Immediately afterwards an angry woman—whose name I should not mention—told me that I had misinterpreted the scripture. I said: “I’m sorry. I apologize. What did I say that upset you?”

Frances replied, “You were wrong when you said that people go to hell because they haven’t fed the hungry and spend eternity with God because they have fed the hungry.”

I was seventeen and not nearly so diplomatic as I am today—so even though she scared me—and even now I am worried that one of you might somehow know her—I foolishly said, “Mrs. Lyerly, it was Jesus who said that.”

If Frances was here I would not call her Frances, and I would try to tactfully say, “It’s not my fault, but if we take the Bible seriously at all, we have to feed the hungry.”

The third thing preachers try to do on World Hunger Day is make their listeners feel guilty by pointing out that what we have could make a difference. Hunger Day can feel like an annual observance of guilt.

For instance, I could point out that the richest five percent of the world's people have incomes 114 times that of the poorest five percent. The wealthiest one fifth of the world—that is most of us—consumes 86 percent of the world's goods while the poorest twenty percent consumes one percent (*United Nations Development Programme*). We have more than enough to share.

There is more than enough to feed everyone. The world's farmers provide 4.3 pounds of food or 2,800 calories per day per person. There is enough for everyone.

Solomon Ernst, a seminary student in Columbus, Ohio, and a native of Liberia said: “When I first came to this country, I cried when I saw all of the food—because my mother died from hunger.”

The cost to end hunger would be relatively small. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. By way of comparison Major League baseball players make a total of about \$2 billion a year and countries around the world spend \$1.6 trillion a year on their militaries. The United States is 37% of that total.

We do not like to admit that what we have could help people who do not have enough. I like wearing new clothes, having money in the bank, and choosing between the four kinds of cereal in the cupboard. We like buying things we do not need, but can we imagine trying to explain to a hungry mother why we do not share more of what we have? What would we think of a family in which the brother stores extra food in his pantry while his sister starves? What would a follower of Jesus do when choosing between tickets to a Broadway play and a starving child in Malawi?

Why don't we give more? We might like to think that we already give through the government, but in a normal year, according to one estimate, about \$13 of the average American family's tax bill goes for international food aid. By percentage our government is sixteenth among industrialized nations in sharing food with the world's hungry. We might like to say that everybody is responsible for themselves, but that does not make sense to a starving four-year-old or a blind father in a village where there are no jobs.

A Christian magazine included a sarcastic advertisement for an organization feeding the hungry. The caption reads: "Look at these starving children. Don't you feel guilty being rich and living in the lap of luxury? Well, you don't need to. Send us your money now, and appease that guilt." There is even a box to check, "Yes, I want to appease my guilt."

At the end of the sermon on World Hunger Day, ministers hope that people will ask, "How much do I have to give to not feel guilty?" Congregations hear their ministers cite statistics, quote the Bible, and try to make them feel guilty enough to give a real offering, but maybe guilt is not the best way to go. Maybe instead of asking, "How guilty do I feel?" we should ask, "Who do I want to be?"

James writes, "What good is it if a person claims to have faith but doesn't do anything? If a brother or sister lacks food and you say to them, 'Go in peace; eat your fill,' what good is that?"

Genuine faith leads us to make real sacrifices for those in need. James says that if we do not feed the hungry then we have missed God's love. Faith does something or it is not faith. Genuine commitment shows itself. Feeding the hungry is acting on what we think we believe. If love does

not flow from our hearts into our actions, then we have to wonder if love really made it into our hearts.

Faith is often misunderstood as agreement with certain ideas, but we have known selfish people who believe the right things. We do not usually become better people by learning more facts. We become better people by acting with compassion.

What we do not always see is that not only do the poor need the gifts of wealthy churchgoers, but wealthy churchgoers need to give, because if we do not give, we will never be who we are meant to be.

Malawi is called “The Warm Heart of Africa.” The country is known for being welcoming and hospitable. Nearly a third of the country has been affected by the worst drought in Southern Africa in 25 years. 25% of the children are malnourished. The majority are part of farming families.

They are experiencing this drought because of climate change. The drought has depleted the soil. Farmers went from making enough to not making enough, from having fruits and vegetables to eat and sell to starving. The farmers in Malawi now need livestock to keep their crops alive, and to keep their children alive. Our church is partnering with Heifer International in a program that will help 24,000 farmers, half of whom are women, in Lilongwe, Malawi.

Our gifts will make their farms sustainable again. Livestock plays a key role, because livestock waste improves the soil. The farms become more resistant to drought. The livestock provides milk for their children. When we give, we are supplying farm families with the livestock, training, and tools they need to have sustainable livelihoods again.

We need to help. This offering will make a difference for you and me, because by sharing with the needy, we give ourselves to God’s love. We become more human as we

care for others. When we share what we have with the poor we become better people.

The offering we give today is an opportunity for us to be a church that cares for starving children. We will never know the names of those whose lives we save, but there are children whom God loves for whom we can make the difference between life and death. If we are true to who we are supposed to be, then we will help hungry people become who they are meant to be.

God invites us to share what we have, empty our wallets, write a check, text a gift, scribble an IOU, place a gift in the basket on the table, and care for people more like God does. There are not many, but there are churches in which people sacrifice to help the hungry. On world hunger day our faith can become real. We have a chance to be genuine Christians.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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