**Matthew 25: I Was Hungry**

**Leviticus 23:22; James 2:15-17**

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When I was in seminary, one of the sentences you heard most often, particularly from second and third year students to first year students, was “you have to learn to live in the ambiguity”.  In other words, in the study of theology as in the journey of faith, there are a lot of questions we just can’t answer. Was Jesus really both divine and human? Was Mary really a virgin? Are heaven and hell real?  Do the bread and wine really become Jesus’ body and blood? People have been asking these questions for centuries, so we’re probably not going to find answers now. Instead, each of us has to sort out the answers that make sense to us.

One example is the question, who is Jesus?  We can find a lot of answers in scripture; Jesus is the Son of God, Son of Man, Bread of Life, Savior, Prophet, Master, Teacher, Lord, Messiah, and many, many more.  But, 2000 years later, many of those names have lost their meaning, and so we are left to figure it out for ourselves. So, the question becomes who is Jesus to me? What meaningful role does Jesus play in my life?  What does Jesus teach me about what it means to live well, as his follower, right here, right now? In this place, in this moment. And that is not ambiguous; it’s really very clear.

Two weeks ago, we had the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows - to remember what we promised when we were baptized or became church members.  Last week, we were led in worship by the amazing Melanie DeMore who reminded us that we are not alone, we have each other, and, in fact, we all, all the people of the earth, need each other, are interdependent, and we all either grow or falter together.

When we look at what Jesus taught, we see that this interdependence is at the heart of his message and, therefore, at the heart of his call for our action.  What does that mean? We find it in Matthew 25 - feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit those in prison.  Six actions that we can be confident define us as followers of Christ. These six actions are what it means to be the church, what it means to live our faith in the world. It’s not an exclusive list, but it is a list we can use as a starting point.

So, for the next six weeks we’re going to look at each of these six actions - what they meant in Jesus’ world, what they mean for us today, and how we can take concrete steps to embody them.  We’ll also hear testimonies from people in our congregation who have, in some way, found spiritual growth and meaning in doing one or more of these.

We’ll start with feeding the hungry - since that’s where Jesus started. The mandate from God to feed the poor is as old as the laws laid down in Leviticus.  In Jewish law, landowners were required to leave some of their crops for the poor to gather. In first century Palestine, at the time Jesus lived, there were two kinds of poor - the working poor and the begging poor.  The disciples were, for the most part, working poor - the population of farmers, fishermen, artisans, and peasants who had a way to get the basics of what a family needed, but because of the 35-40% taxes they paid, would never get ahead, never move up the social ladder.  Some of the working poor would, inevitably, be unable to pay those taxes and so would lose their land or property and become the begging poor - people who survived only through the generosity of others. The begging poor typically also had lost their families and had no one to take them in and care for them.  So, the begging poor included not only those who had lost their land or property but also widows, orphans, those who were sick, and those who had, for whatever reason, been thrown out of the community to fend for themselves.

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?  Here, more than two thousand years later, in the wealthiest country in the world, at a point in history when truly we are a global economy, both the working poor and the begging poor are still with us. Let me just throw a few statistics at you.  Right here in Ann Arbor, our poverty rate is 22.1%, so 1 in 5 people lives in poverty. That also translates to 1 in 5 schoolchildren qualify for free or reduced lunch. If you look at Washtenaw County more broadly, that changes to 1 in 7 living in poverty.  And at the state level, it is 1 out of every 6.4.

If we look at the number of people in Michigan who qualify for the federal food stamp program, now called SNAP, that number is 1 in 7 Michigan residents and 1 in 4 Michigan children. Almost 50% of Michigan children qualify for free or reduced lunch.

That’s just our neighborhood.  Of course, we can look at this from a national or international point of view, as well.  In the US in 2018, the poverty rate was 11.8%% and approximately 40 million people used food stamps.  Globally, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 10.7% of the people in the world suffer from chronic under-nutrition - the vast majority of who live in Asia and Africa.

So, if one of the six actions that Jesus expects of us is to feed the hungry, what do we do?  First of all, there are things we can do by changing how we live. Americans throw out approximately 150,000 tons of food per day and, ironically, the healthiest Americans are the worst offenders. People who seek to eat healthily eat more vegetables and fruits.  They purchase more of those than they will eat and end up throwing out what goes bad. There are a lot of good things about shifting to a more plant-based diet. Not only is it good for your health, it decreases your carbon footprint. About 40% of grain produced in the world is fed to animals rather than to people.  In addition, according to Greenpeace, “the livestock sector - raising cows, pigs, and chickens - produces more methane gas than all trucks and automobiles combined.” That said, you undo your good works if you end up throwing out the food you buy. An easy first step is to plan your meals and only buy the fruits and vegetables you will consume between grocery shopping trips.

Of course, there are ways to feed the hungry directly, as well.  In your bulletin, you can find a list of groups within our church and within our community that help to feed hungry people here in Ann Arbor, in the United States, and in the world.  Our Love Thy Neighbor program provides lunches to people who are food insecure every Saturday as well as offering them canned goods that they can take with them. Love Thy Neighbor needs volunteers every Friday night to make lunches and every Saturday morning to distribute lunches and food.  They also ask us to bring in food on the first weekend of each month. You can also provide a meal during our host weeks at Alpha House, Ann Arbor’s shelter for homeless families. Food Gatherers and Community Action Network are two local organizations that help to feed hungry individuals and families in Washtenaw County.  Both depend on churches and volunteers to help with growing food, distributing food, and donating food. At the national and international level, consider donating to Feeding America, Heifer International, or any of the many United Methodist ministries focused on reducing hunger in the world.

Two other opportunities are available to you right now.  We have a group here at church called Mind the Gap, and they work on issues of hunger and poverty.  Right now, they are inviting us to write letters gather to congress asking our representatives to protect the SNAP, WIC, and free and reduced lunch programs in our country.  Just Tuesday, the Washington Post reported that new rules were proposed over the summer that would cut an estimated 3 million people from the SNAP program. In addition, approximately half a million children would lose their free or reduced lunch.  One way to feed the hungry is to advocate for the right to food.

The other opportunity you have right now is to participate in or donate to the CROP walk.  In a few minutes, Spring Jackson is going to tell you a bit about the CROP walk as well as why helping to feed the poor has been an important part of her spiritual journey.

A lot of our journey of faith takes just that, faith.  Many aspects of spirituality are ambiguous, and we are asked to have faith in them anyway.  But, what Jesus expects of us as his disciples, what Jesus calls us to do is clear and consistent - true from the law in Leviticus through the New Testament and on to today.  There are too many hungry people in our town and our world. May we hear those words from James, “faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead” and each of us finds a way to enact our faith by feeding those who hunger.

May it be so.