

Connecting Church and Community: Food Insecurity **Isaiah 58:10; Matthew 25:34-40**

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Apparently, last fall, David Beasley, director of the United Nations World Food Programme, challenged Tesla Motors CEO, Elon Musk, and other billionaires to step up with multi-billion dollars donations to help end world hunger. Beasley said that \$6 billion could save “42 million people that are literally going to die if we don’t help them”. Well, Musk, whose fortune is nearly \$280 billion, heard about this and said he would donate the \$6 billion if Beasley could show him how it would end world hunger. While Beasley claimed \$6 billion would end the world hunger problem, he said he would put together a plan to show Musk the impact that much money could make. Beasley followed through. Apparently, Musk did not - at least not in a donation anyone knows about. So, this week, when Musk bought Twitter for \$44 billion, the social media world was in an uproar. If \$6 billion dollars could save the lives of 42 million people, how many starving people could be saved with \$44 billion?

There is so much to say about this. About how absurd it is that one person could have a fortune of \$280 billion dollars when an estimated 811 million people in the world go hungry every day. About how crazy our priorities are that a social media platform is worth \$44 billion when over 38 million people, including 11 million children, in the United States experienced food insecurity in 2020. And about how desperately the world needs us to continue doing the work of building the kin-dom of God.

These numbers - \$44 billion dollars, 811 million people - are almost impossible for us to grasp. How can we help grow the kin-dom when the scale is so huge? Well, much like Shonagh talked about last week in looking at our environment, we can focus locally. None of us has the billions of dollars needed to end world hunger, but we can address the problem in our own backyard. We are in the middle of a sermon series called “Connecting the Church and Community” in which we are examining real issues we are facing in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County right now and how we, as people of faith, might respond to them. Today, I’d like to continue our series as we talk about food insecurity.

The USDA defines food insecurity as “the lack of reliable, consistent access to enough affordable, nutritious food for an active, healthy lifestyle”. In the United States, Black and Latinx households are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity with rates in 2020 triple and double the rate of White households. Feeding America estimates that there are 42,450 people, including 6,090 children, experiencing food insecurity in Washtenaw County today. Every community in the county has people who aren’t getting enough food. And, the Maize and Blue Cupboard, a food pantry for students at the University of Michigan, estimates that 30% of U of M students struggle with food insecurity.

Of course, Covid only made things worse. Not long after the pandemic began in March 2020, the partner agencies that work with Food Gatherers, our local food rescue organization, reported a 30-300% increase in people requesting food. Nearly half of them had never needed to ask for food before. Child Tax Credit monies helped. 77% percent of Michigan families report

using their child tax credit for food. Yet, the need in our county and throughout our state is still great.

As people of faith, our scripture and tradition both have much to tell us about our responsibility to feed the hungry. Jesus grew up steeped in the teachings of the Torah and the stories of the people of Israel who had faced hunger themselves. Abraham, Isaac, the children of Jacob, Naomi and Ruth all left their homelands in search of food during times of famine. When God's people escaped from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness fearful that they would not have food to eat or safe water to drink. God provided for them with daily manna and fresh water.

With these stories as context, the expectation that we give food to those who are hungry is deeply ingrained in Jewish culture and law. We see it in Leviticus: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God." The people were to intentionally leave the last of their crops in the fields to provide food for those who needed it. The prophets were quick to point out when God's people began to turn away from caring for others and look only to their own self-interests - often with harsh and biting criticism but sometimes with words of promise and inspiration. Jesus would have known well the words we heard earlier from Isaiah 58, "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday".

So, it is not surprising that one of the most common themes in Jesus's teachings is that we feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty. Jesus was an apocalyptic teacher - he believed that the end of the world as they knew it was imminent. When it came, God would judge all the nations and decide who would inherit the kin-dom of God. 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' In his words, giving food to the hungry is the very first measure of our faithfulness.

There is a midrash to Psalm 118:17 that says something similar: "When you are asked in the world to come, 'What was your work?' and you answer: 'I fed the hungry,' you will be told: 'This is the gate of the Lord, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry'".

So, the question is what can we do? Our church has a number of programs already that address food insecurity. Our Love Thy Neighbor program was started in 2008 to distribute lunches and canned goods at St. Andrew's weekly breakfast for those who do not have homes and are food insecure. Jodi Kozma has led their efforts for the last six years and deserves our deep gratitude for the work she has done. Thank you, Jodi. When the pandemic started, the service model for both the St. Andrews breakfast and Love Thy Neighbor had to change. St. Andrews now distributes pre-packed breakfast and Love Thy Neighbor is focusing on distributing canned foods. Laurie Brannan and Cathy Pardon are now leading the program. If you would like to donate either money or time, you can contact one of them.

Of course, we also have four weeks each year when we prepare and serve meals at Alpha House, the local shelter for homeless families. This is a great opportunity to actually build relationships and interact with our neighbors in need. Beth and Bill Lipton have been doing an amazing job with coordinating our teams there. Thank you, both!

There are three things you can do right now! Today or any time in the next few weeks! The first is to stop at the tables our Mind the Gap group has set up in the narthex and outside the offices. There, you can pick up a packet to participate in this year's Offering of Letters through Bread for the World. The Offering of Letters takes place each year in churches all over the country when congregation members write to their congressional representatives concerning a specific issue related to hunger. This year, the particular focus is on children, and Mind the Gap is asking us to write letters addressing two issues: expanding free school meals to additional children and making the Child Tax Credit permanent.

A second thing you can do right away is to participate in our cereal drive for Hope Clinic. As you may know, a number of people in our congregation have volunteered at Hope Clinic in recent years. Hope is an Ypsilanti-based agency which provides no-cost medical, dental, and behavioral health care as well as food to those in Ypsilanti and Wayne, Michigan. In 2020, they responded to 60,000 requests for help. Right now, the cereal shelves in their food pantry are nearly empty. For the next three weeks, you can bring boxes of cereal to the church, leave them on the cart outside the sanctuary, and Melanie Snook will see that they get to Hope.

Finally, you can make a contribution to our emergency fund. This is the fund we use to help individuals who come to us in crisis. We may buy a gift card for groceries for them, help them pay a utility bill, and help them out of another kind of difficult situation.

So, those are some tangible ways to act right now to impact food-insecurity in our own county. However, I would also like to challenge us to look beyond the present to the future. In the coming months, we'll be talking about how we can use our resources - particularly our buildings and property in support of our mission. If God's mission for the church is to embody and grow the kin-dom of God, how will we do that in the coming five, ten, or fifty years and what do we need from our facilities? Now is a time to start dreaming about what we might do to walk alongside those in need in the future - including those who are challenged with food insecurity. We may not have 280 billion dollars, but we are a generous and financially stable church that can continue to make a significant impact in our community in the coming decades if we use our resources wisely.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus met people at the table. He ate with the poor, the outcasts, even the tax collectors. And the night before he died, he gave us the meal we call Holy Communion to help us to remember all that he taught us and to nourish us for the work ahead. The giving and receiving of food is woven deep into our Christian faith. In a few moments, we will celebrate Communion together. As you prepare yourself to take from the bread and the cup, I invite you to do so with a question on your heart, "How can I feed the family of Christ?" and listen for his response.

May it be so. Amen.