

SHORTAGE, RECESSION, AND JESUS

Scriptures: John 6:1-13, 6:25-35

This week I am going to preach two sermons instead of one. Now don't get nervous. The sermon will not be twice as long. It will be two sermons, each about half as long.

The first sermon is about people who need bread. There are a lot of people in the world in that category. A 2008 study by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations estimates that 963 million people in the world are underfed, which means nearly 1 billion people in the world do not receive enough calories each day to maintain their health and functioning. Another study in 2006 estimated that 25,000 people a day die from hunger and hunger related causes. 25,000 a day! That means hunger and hunger related illnesses around the world wipe out the entire population of Spokane almost every week.

And it affects people even in Spokane. On average 15,000 people a month receive food at one of Spokane County's 21 food banks. To meet that need Second Harvest of the Inland Northwest, the central food bank warehouse, distributed 3.7 million pounds of food last year to area food banks.

It gives you a new perspective on this scripture reading. Jesus is trying to feed 5,000 people, and all he has are five loaves of bread and two fish given to him by a young boy.

Now if I had been the kid in this story, here is what I would have done. I would have given Jesus four of the loaves and kept one for myself. That way, if no one else got enough to eat, at least I would. Actually, I probably would have kept two of them, in case I got hungry on the way home. Or maybe three loaves, in case I got hungry tomorrow. And a fourth loaf for retirement. I probably would have kept four of the loaves and shared the fifth one. Now that is pretty generous, don't you think? One out of five is a double tithe, not just 10% but 20%. Jesus could not possibly expect an offering bigger than that.

Besides, it really would not matter how much I give, because most of those five thousand people will go home hungry anyway. My five loaves will not make a difference in a crowd that big. So I would just keep four of my loaves, so at least I have enough, and I would give the fifth one to Jesus, just to show how generous I am.

But the kid does not do that. The kid gives the whole basket—all five loaves and two fish—to Jesus. And Jesus uses them to feed the whole crowd, including the kid.

There is a simple lesson here. When things are tight, when the economy is in the tank, when there is a recession and shortages and you are beginning to wonder where you will get your next meal or your next house payment—that is not the time to hoard but the time to share. Because if we share what we have with Jesus, he can make it enough. He can multiply the gift.

Let me give an example. Last spring almost every tax payer got a \$600 stimulus check from the federal government. It was supposed to stimulate the economy by encouraging people

to buy things. But several people I knew, and probably more that I did not know, got creative with that stimulus check. They gave the \$600 to a local Christian organization that was helping people in need, like the Food Bank or the Liberty Park Child Development Center. And if you follow what happens to those gifts, you will discover that they are multiplied.

Let me give two examples. If you went to the store you could buy a pound of apples for, say, \$1.50 to give to someone in need. Recently, however, the Second Harvest Food Bank obtained a semi-load of apples from Wenatchee for only the cost of transportation, which came to about 6 pounds per dollar. In other words, for a \$1.50 you could give a pound of apples to someone in need; but that same \$1.50 given to the Food Bank could give 9 pounds of apples to people in need. I like to think that is subtle work of Jesus, who is still multiplying the gift.

Another example. If you give a dollar to the Liberty Park Child Development Center, it does four different things simultaneously. First, it pays the salary of a child care worker or preschool teacher who works with low income children. That is an immediate stimulus. You give a job to someone who now has the money to buy things. Second, that same dollar pays for child care for a low income person who can now get a job or go to school to get a job. That is an intermediate stimulus. You make it possible for another person to get a job and become a productive member of our economy. Third, that same dollar provides a wonderful early education experience for a low income child. Studies show that quality preschool experiences help children do better in school later on. That dollar now becomes a long term stimulus, an investment in the education of the future American workforce. And fourth, since Liberty Park is a Presbyterian mission project of our Presbytery, the children learn about God and Jesus in the process. Now that is a stimulus. That is Jesus multiplying the gift.

Jesus can still multiply your loaves if you give him a chance. That is why we have things like the One Great Hour of Sharing. That is why we give 20% of our pledges to mission in our own community and around the world. An investment in Jesus is an investment that will pay off when it comes to people who need bread. That is the first sermon.

Now for the second sermon. Something interesting happens at the end of this story about Jesus feeding 5,000 people. The people want to make Jesus a king. It is not hard to see why. Anyone who could feed five thousand people with five loaves of bread could also fund health care, pay for social security, cut taxes, reduce the deficit, and finish the north-south freeway. Who does not want leader like that?

But Jesus won't have it. John 6:15 says, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." One ancient Greek manuscript of this verse is even more dramatic. It says that Jesus "fled" to the mountain by himself. Why?

That brings me to our second scripture reading. In John 6:27 Jesus says to the crowd, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." The first sermon is about people who need bread. The second sermon is about people who need more than bread.

When Mother Teresa, the nun who worked for decades among desperately poor people in Calcutta, India, came to the United States, she was asked what she thought of the prosperity in this country. This, of course, was back when the country was still prosperous. She said, "I have never seen so many starving people." She was not talking about homeless people sleeping on steam grates. She was talking about people who had more than the rest of the world could imagine, and still felt empty.

Later in 1980 when Mother Teresa spoke to the Synod of Bishops in Rome, she told this story:

Recently, a man met me on the street. He said: "Are you Mother Teresa?" I said, "Yes." He said: "Please send somebody to my house. My wife is half mental and I am half blind. But we are longing to hear the loving sound of a human voice." They were well-to-do people. They had everything in their home. Yet they were dying of loneliness, dying to hear a loving voice (*Come Be My Light*, pp. 295-296).

At the end of our second scripture reading Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In a recession it is important to share our bread with others in our community, because Jesus can multiply our loaves to feed more people than we ever imagined. But at the same time we need to share more than bread. That is what we are doing at the communion table this morning. We need to share bread with people in our community, but we also need to share more than bread. We need to share the bread of life, the bread of hope, the bread of community, the bread of Jesus to people dying to hear a loving voice.

- Ken Onstot
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