

Until All Are Fed

October 1, 2023

Rev. Sarah Campbell

Exodus 16

Hunger is increasing dramatically in our state and our nation, and it's not just because of inflation. Instead it's mostly because the pandemic relief policies have expired. One front line MN food shelf director reported an 80% increase in new families since the federal pandemic aid expired this past Spring. (Fox News) These are our neighbors. Mostly children. Who are living once again with hunger pangs and fading hope. Hungry children.

It's unacceptable. We are being judged by God, the ultimate referent, the universe, and by history. And our hearts, if not hardening with indifference or weariness, are hurting and stirring with angry power....

When others say or imply that inequality, as a state of being for a society, and that means hunger, is not so bad, they are wrong. And, if they say they are Christian, ask them where they go to church and what is being preached from the pulpit and sung by the choir and congregation.

Sure, you can cherry pick, and find a few passages that might support with a stretch, this belief that inequality is not so bad, but the Bible as a whole, and our 2,000 years of Christian tradition, does not support this belief AT ALL. And it is demonic to distort our religion in this way. Christians believe that there is enough for all. And that God favors no one over anyone else.

William Brueggemann, a renowned and influential Old Testament, or Hebrew scripture scholar, who shaped so many of us, and has now become, in the last decade with the rise of the far right, a public theologian, puts it this way in his book Ancient Echoes.

It may be that some measure of inequality is inescapable in a complex economy (and I want to add here that almost every nation has a mixed economy, public owned institutions like libraries, highways, social security, and private owned institutions like Target and Excell and your local coffee house; and some nations lean more towards public ownership and some more towards private; and governments hold the puzzle pieces together with regulation, taxation and antitrust laws) Back to Brueggeman...he writes.. that some measure of inequality is inescapable. It is, however, quite another matter to advocate that inequality is a social practice that is to be valued, endorsed, and sought after. The Bible is preoccupied- long before Karl Marx- with the problem of haves and have-nots, of the legitimate claims of the have-nots, and the dangers of

the haves who possess in excess. While some inequality is not only inescapable but bearable, the extremes of inequality featuring greed in policy and in practice are irresponsible and cannot end well for our society. In the end greed is a practice that can only lead to a false life, and to the failure and defeat of truthfulness, justice and social wellbeing. Preach it Brueggemann!!

The idea that hunger, and extreme inequality in our country, is somehow ok goes radically against our religion. Jesus, you turn over the money changers tables. We need you now to come and turn over the pulpits where this distortion is preached. Tear down the façade.

You who have enough and want to stay conscience-comfortable, you may not like going into our holy book... This stuff is deep, these stories and metaphors potent, unnerving... It's about salvation for your soul, our society, our earth. And watch out! This is what we're teaching our young! Yes, we are!

Our bible story today is from the book of Exodus. The Bible, of course, is full of stories, stories are the best way to get into the human heart, that, and song. But for our Jewish siblings this story of the Exodus may be the most important one of all. And it is central to our faith as Christians as well.

The people had been enslaved in Egypt. While Pharaoh and his minions enjoyed feasts and relaxation all the time, the slaves, the workers, never had sabbath rest. Never. But God is more powerful than Pharaoh and liberates the people, helps them escape and leads them to the promised land of freedom and life abundant. But first they wander in the desert for a *long* time. While wandering in the desert, stripped of any distractions, they learn so much about God, God's will for them and how they are to live in concert with God's will. They learn the 10 commandments, which is an eternal summons to live in a communal, disciplined, generous, generative mode. It's a moral plumb line forever.

Today's story is a lesson from God in how to live, both during the wilderness time and after they finally arrive in the promised land. This is how the creator intends for human beings to live.

They are to be free. Not enslaved. They are to practice sabbath rest, the fourth commandment, to simply enjoy being alive. And the people are to only take what they need, the food they need, no more, no stockpiling. And there will be enough for all.

Moses said to them, *"It is the bread that God has given you to eat.¹⁶ This is what God has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer per person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents."¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less.¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed."* It was their daily bread, bread wondrously given for that day. And Moses said to them, *"Let no one leave any of it over until morning."* This is a

key phrase. Don't take more than you need. Do not stockpile. *But they did not listen to Moses;* ²¹ some left part of it until morning... Some tried to hoard the surplus. Moses gets very angry with them. And God enforces the commandment... The hoarded manna becomes wormy and rotten: it spoils overnight.

God wants them to remember this lesson in shared abundance, no hoarding, when they are living in the land of milk and honey. God wants them to remember this lesson forever, so it shapes how they live, how they organize themselves, how they govern. Forever, not just in the wilderness. So no one is hungry and no one has too much.

God tells them keep a portion of the manna in a jar in the temple as a constant reminder of how God provides, and that no one should take more than they need. It is written: *"Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before God to be kept throughout your generations."*

When they come to the land of Canaan, land of milk and honey, they clutch this jar tightly and bring it with them as they cross over, and it forever reminds them, corrects them when needed, judges them...

"This is the bread of heaven not the bread of production

the bread of equality, not the bread of inequality.

The bread of generosity, not of greed

The bread of hope, not of fear." (Brueggemann)

Oh, people of God, do not forget.

During our wilderness time, during the pandemic, all were fed.

"Three and a half years ago, the Covid 19 pandemic struck the US and the economy sputtered in the direction of collapse. Between February and April 2020, the unemployment rate doubled—then it doubled again. The federal government responded to this free fall with bold and immediate relief. Like the manna in the desert... It expanded the time window in which laid off workers could collect unemployment and, added supplementary benefits like stimulus checks, rental assistance, expanded child tax credit, more SNAP or "food stamp" dollars, And hear this!: poverty did not increase during the worse economic downturn in nearly a century. It fell and by a tremendous amount. Poverty fell for all racial and ethnic groups. It fell for people who lived in cities and those who lived in rural areas. It fell for the young and the old. It fell the most for children. Swift government action didn't just prevent economic disaster, it helped to cut child poverty by more than half." (Desmond)

Let us never forget. Like manna in the desert, people were provided for in a hard, hard wilderness time. We know we can do it. And it also makes economic sense... “States that retain some or all of the benefits after the feds stopped last March, continue to have the fastest job growth”. (Desmond) But as Christians, regardless of the economic sense it makes, we know it is immoral not to feed everyone, that extreme inequality goes against everything we’ve been taught in church since we were babies.

The Israelites carried a jar with an omer of manna and it is always with them reminding them to share the abundance, not to hoard. What might we put in a jar or a frame and place next to the Bible to remind us of the shared abundance during our wilderness time?. a SNAP check of the additional 95 dollars a month in pandemic aide that made all the difference to our neighbors who are food insecure?

Until all are fed... Until all are fed, we will give to VEAP. Until all are fed we’ll deliver meals on wheels. Until all are fed we’ll organize with Isaiah and Beacon. Until all are fed, we’ll vote for those who believe in shared abundance. Until all are fed, we’ll sing. We’ll cry out. We won’t stop. God is ever agitating us to action... until all are fed.

Sources

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Desmond, Matthew, “The High Cost of Being Poor”, The New York Review of Books, April 20, 2023.

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Fretheim, Terence, Exodus: Interpretation, John Knox, 1991.

