

“Feeding the World”
John 6:1-21
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
July 25, 2021

Live Aid was July 13 1985, so two weeks and 36 years ago. I am of the Live Aid generation — biggest thing ever, united the planet in trying to do some good for people. It was a big benefit concert, held both in London and in Philadelphia, to raise money for relief of the years-long famine devastating Ethiopia. I lived in the Philly suburbs and I’ve been to JFK Stadium, which no longer exists. It holds 102,000 people. I was there once — when you have 102,000 people doing something in unison, it is really moving.

In the 80s, I loved Phil Collins, Genesis was a great favorite of mine, although over time I gravitate more strongly to the Peter Gabriel years, we can talk about that if you like. Point being that Phil Collins was the only musician who played at both Wembley in London and JFK in Philadelphia. We had a thing called the Concorde back then. It has been gone for a while now, but it was an airplane that flew faster than the speed of sound. You could go from Heathrow in the UK to JFK in the US in about three hours. For contrast, a good quick crossing in a conventional big airplane is more than twice that, now — but that was so very fast, they made an offer for anyone to fly free if they wanted to play both shows. As well as his own set at both venues, he also played the drums for Eric Clapton, and played with the reuniting surviving members of Led Zeppelin.

What’s the point of all that, you may be wondering? I’ll get to that a little later in the sermon. When all was said and done, somewhere between 130 and 150 million in total has been raised for famine relief as a direct result of the concerts.

This is also where many of my generation learned about unintended consequences. Unintended consequences — the food got to political borders and was stopped. The Ethiopian government was to blame for some of this. When you let people starve and suffer, it is easier to gain a political advantage over them, after all.

There was more. Food got to the docks and rotted — lack of a means to get to the people who needed it the most. You bring it from all over the world, get it to the dock or the airport, but if you don't have trucks, roads, rule of law and similar infrastructure, you can't reach those who need it.

Lots of starving, dying children were shown often on TV, to encourage people to get on the phone and make a donation. There were further unintended consequences — met two Ethiopian women in college, nothing at all like those images we saw on TV intended to yank our heart strings, All of which were intended to move our hearts to compassion, but in many cases instead ended up creating or reinforcing some racist impressions of Africa and Africans.

I am not saying that showing suffering is wrong. In this case it was very intentionally to stir your heart, increase your compassion, and move you to take action to relieve the pain of others.

But I am saying that if the only time you ever see or hear anything about the African continent is in context of suffering or violence, it cannot help but shape your impression of the people and their society. Same thing when you only talk about Africa without specifying the region or nation.

I am also a Gen Xer — we tend to be a little cynical about things, in part because we saw that ultimately it didn't save the world, and in some ways, it may have made things worse. How are things today? Today, 795 million people are hungry. Another 2 billion are expected to join them by 2050. Writer Jeremy Erdman on Medium confirms that currently, globally, we produce enough food to feed everyone in the world, a number rapidly approaching 8 billion — 1.5 times — so that's enough that no one anywhere goes hungry, with enough left for well over 3 billion more.

What's the problem? Our inability to feed the entirety of the world's population is mostly due to food waste. Globally, 30–40% of all food is wasted. In less developed countries, this waste is due to lack of infrastructure and knowledge to keep food fresh. India alone loses 30–40% of its produce because retail and wholesalers lack cold storage. In more developed countries, the lower relative cost of food reduces the incentive not to waste. And as portion size grows, more and more food is thrown out and wasted.

I bet I'm not the only one here who has heard the words take all you want, but eat all you take. Right? It seems that if we actually did that, actually took that to heart — there would be enough to go around.

The reason an additional 2 billion people are expected to go hungry in the next few decades, by the way, is because of climate change. The American midwest alone is expected to drop more than 20% in its ability to produce food, not to mention central and south America, all of which will trigger climate refugees... but that, clearly, gets us off in a new direction and into a sermon that will have to wait for another day.

By the way, the CT Food Bank is having a Walk for Hunger September 18. Hopefully a few of us can participate in that.

What is the point of these Gospel stories we are reading today?

People would have talked about Jesus making enough bread in the wilderness to feed an impossibly large number of people, and would have thought back to stories they had heard from the Hebrew Bible, of God providing the hungry with manna when there were no other sources of food.

Jesus asks Philip about it first though. The scripture even tells us, Jesus knew the answer, knew what he was going to do — but he had a point to make. Remember, in John's Gospel, what Jesus does something supernatural we don't think of them as miracles. We think of them as signs and wonders, meaning they are done quite specifically to demonstrate the power of God, to confirm that Jesus indeed was the long awaited Messiah as was claimed. If it's really all that important, you want to make sure people are paying attention when you do it.

Interestingly, of all the miraculous things credited to Jesus, the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle, the only sign of his divinity, to appear in all four of the Gospels. Seems like one of the few things everyone agrees on is that this is important, so pay attention.

Jesus is a healer, so he heals a lot. As for other miracles, they seem to typically be a one-time only occurrence. Which is too bad, because scripture tells us the first miracle was creating wine for all of the wedding guests, and would probably have been a very welcome accompaniment to all of that bread. Bread and fish, that's pretty good, but bread and wine seems a pretty good pairing, too.

Remember, this Gospel was written decades after the events it describes. By now, early Christians would be used to the idea the Jesus offers us himself in the bread and the wine, and so a miraculous

offering of bread would foreshadow what was to come, and I bet most of them would recognize the connection to the sacrament of holy communion.

Some of them might have known the Hebrew Bible. If they had, they might have known this tale of one of the very greatest of prophets, Elisha, from 2 Samuel:

A man came from Baal Shalishah (BAY-uhl-shuh-LAI-shuh), bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said.

"How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked.

But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.

If Elisha is one of the greatest, feeding 100 men with 20 loaves, then what to make of Jesus, feeding 5000 with 5 loaves? Jesus is intentionally being placed in that lineage, not in the middle, but at the top. From a historical perspective, readers would have read of Jesus crossing the water, and made a connection to the Exodus, and the people's route to freedom taking them through the water. Moses was maybe the greatest of all the prophets -- and Jesus is not only in that league, but he crosses the sea on foot? Ancient readers would have connected the dots there, too

Personally, I am intrigued at the baskets of leftovers. Remember that part about our modern food waste contributing to people not having enough to eat? When someone has brought a home cooked meal, and there's a story behind it, doesn't make the food just that much better? Imagine the people getting this barley bread in the story that came with it!

Remember, the manna in the wilderness came with the stern warning that you don't save any of it. Jesus taught us to pray saying give us this day what we need, and we will trust that God will provide what we need for tomorrow, and the day after. Take all you want, but eat all you take. You could say that the tradition taught that you take all you **need**, not all you **want**. If everyone takes what they need, then no one goes without.

I could stop there. That is a good message — if no one is greedy, then everyone has enough. That applies to just about everything here in 2021 — but not everyone has gotten the message, so it is up to us as Christians to preach it. And preaching it is maybe 10 percent about speech and writing, and 90 percent about how we act. I could stop now and take up the offering, but that seems a little obvious, so I'll keep going.

What else? I told you, some of us got a little cynical that we were unable to eliminate hunger through our actions, and may well have contributed to further harm. One of the bands that performed was U2, whose singer Bono has had a few things to say over the years. When told that Live Aid may have helped those who were making things worse for the poorest people, Bono responded that corruption, not disease or famine, was the greatest threat to Africa, agreeing with the belief that foreign relief organizations should decide how the money is spent. On the other hand, Bono said that it was better to spill some funds into nefarious quarters for the sake of those who needed it than to stifle aid because of possible theft.

Two big points coming out of that — one, rather than be stingy so as to avoid helping the undeserving, be absolutely lavish with our help. Be wasteful! Love so much there are a dozen baskets of leftovers. Yes some of it will go to people you don't like. We are commanded to restrict our help to the deserving.

The other point is another one we could go on about a great length, but in brief, it is that if you want to help people in Africa, the best way to do it is to ask Africans what they need, rather than sending them whatever **you** think they should have. It has taken decades for many white Americans to understand that we have been perpetuating a white savior narrative, swooping in to help the poor black people. We appear to be moving into a new paradigm, of understanding it is far better to partner with people in need, and our stepping back so that they may be in charge of their own destiny, and working with them.

There is a third point. Be inspired, and then get involved however you can. In the aftermath of Live Aid, first world nations took a closer look at the root causes of world poverty. The Center for International Development at Harvard University says 700 million poverty-stricken people live in countries so burdened with foreign debt they cannot address citizens' health and social needs.

Bono joined Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama and several other well-known people in urging the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other individual countries to write off poor country debt. By the early 2000s, the international community wrote off more than \$100 billion of African government borrowings. In 2007, Bono noted that debt cancellation programs had already opened the way for 20 million African children to go to school.

Raising \$150 million is a good thing, but you must admit, canceling \$100 billion in debt has a chance to go even farther, with those being helped having much more active agency in their own circumstances. Not to sniff at \$150 million! If you have \$150 million you were thinking of tithing but now are feeling slighted, please see me after worship so I can clarify.

There IS enough food for all, but only if we work together. Musician Bob Geldof thought up Live Aid, and in turn inspired Bono and many others to go a little farther to do whatever they could. And what they did was nothing like what had inspired him in the first place.

Jesus fed 5000, but also saved the leftovers, knowing that there were more hungry people besides those who came to him. Jesus has inspired people to pitch in and do what they can, and “what they can” looks very different depending on the person.

Where does this congregation fit into that picture? How about for you?

I pray that God grant us the vision, and the courage to act. No matter where that takes us, no matter what it may look like. Amen.