

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT!

For thirty-six years now, our church has hosted the biggest Thanksgiving dinner in Westport. Ever since Ted Hoskins suggested that those who wanted to share a meal should come to church, it has gotten more and more elaborate. This past Thursday, over two-hundred folks enjoyed the music of two local bands, ate turkey with all the trimmings, and took home homemade breads and fruit. Dozens of volunteers shopped and cooked and set tables. Dozens more procured donations and cleaned up after the last guest left. Pastor Susanna, Don and Susan O'Guin, Ricki LeTowt, Mark Montgomery and Mary Ann West all did a great job of rallying the troops.

For several years now some of our finest support has come from the kids at Coleytown Elementary and Middle Schools. The middle school kids raise a significant sum of money to help underwrite the Feast. The elementary school children make table decorations and cards for each person who attends. I just love reading the cards! They are often quite witty, and truly come from the heart.

One of this year's cards, featuring a turkey on orange construction paper, reads: "Dear Best Bud, Happy Thanksgiving! I hope you have a blast. From Eliana."

Another, decorated with colorful feathers, is very politically correct: "Dear He or She," it begins, "I hope you have a good Thanksgiving."

A girl named Blythe must have been told by her teacher that some of our guests at the feast come simply because they are all alone and want some company. Her card, with an adorable brown turkey on blue construction paper, reads: "Dear Friend, Happy Thanksgiving. I hope you can find a friend after Thanksgiving so you can have a friend before the next Thanksgiving."

Most of the cards, though, focus on the meal itself. Alyssia wrote: "Have a Happy Thanksgiving. Eat a lot of turkey." And Jayan gets right to the point: "Eat all the turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy and pumpkin pie, even if you have to stuff yourself."

Certainly if you come to our feast you can do just that. And, indeed, across the nation, many, many churches and community groups hold similar Thanksgiving meals. Most anyone and everyone can get enough to eat on Thanksgiving. And that is a good thing, a very good thing indeed! But that, unfortunately doesn't seem to be the case the other 364 days of the year.

Here are a few statistics. Mind you, these are just for the United States. They don't even begin to address the issue of hunger around the world.

There are just about three hundred million people here in the United States. 38.2 million of them, over one in ten, are part of households that experience hunger or are at a high risk of hunger. That's up almost two million people since 2003.

Of those households that experience hunger on a regular basis, some skip meals, go without food for whole days or eat amounts of food that are well below that which is needed to thrive. 545, 000 of these folks are children. Over half-a-million children in the United States are hungry and don't have enough to eat.

Research demonstrates that when children go hungry they run much higher risks of severe health problems including chronic illness and depression.

Those who are hungry are not just the down and out on skid rows across the land. Among those who requested emergency food service, 40% of the adults were employed. And, in 2005, such requests were up 12% from the prior year. (All statistics, www.breadfortheworld.org)

In an editorial this past week the New York *Times* noted that the government's annual report on hunger has made a semantic change this year. Instead of calling it hunger, they are referring to it as "low food security." "The Agriculture Department," note the *Times*, "decided that variations on [the word] 'hunger' are not scientifically accurate The specialists advised that being hungry was too amorphous a way to refer to 'a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food results in discomfort, illness, weakness or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.'" (November 20, 2006)

We have a problem, friends. If we think we can solve it by changing the word "hunger" to bureaucratic gobble-de-gook, we are only fooling ourselves. While we need to find ways to accurately count the number of folks who don't have enough to eat in this country, changing how we label it won't put food on their tables! We need to wrestle with the fact that hunger comes as a result of an economic system that does not always work.

Perhaps the way to address this issue is to work at a much more visceral level. The *Times* editorial implies that, quote, "more public empathy is needed to prod a stronger attack" on the problem.

Theologian Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, says much the same thing: "We need to develop," he writes, "an imaginative sympathy for the poor. . . . For the most part we don't personally know [them] Our neighborhoods are increasingly divided by income. So also are our churches, not by design but by circumstance This is not something to feel quality about Rather it is something to do something about." (202

I agree. We need to develop imaginative sympathy for those who are hungry. We need to know, not just in our heads, but in our hearts as well, just how devastating hunger can be. For not having enough to eat can strike at the very core of our being.

To that end, our story from Daniel provides a powerful reminder of one of the fundamentals at play in this issue.

It is set in the days when the Jews are living in exile. Some of their young men have been selected by the Babylonian king for special treatment. They are to become members of his court for three years, undergo special training, and learn the ways of the Babylonians. They will also be expected to eat the rich foods and drink of the court.

But Daniel and the others protest. The foods they are being asked to consume will not fit the criteria of their kosher diets. They want a diet of vegetables and water.

At first there is resistance to their suggestion, but finally, as an experiment, the king and his advisors relent. And it is a smashing success. The four young men fare far better than their contemporaries. “In every matter of wisdom and understanding,” writes the author, “the king found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.” (1:20)

Now the reality is that their diet was probably far healthier than the fat laden meats and baked goods that were normally set at the king’s table. But this wasn’t just about lower cholesterol. Rachel Remen, a Jewish doctor, writes, “Judaism considers food a visible manifestation of the covenant between God and man. There is a special way to prepare the food as well as special dishes on which to eat specific [foods]; special blessings to be said over the food and over the cooking. In the life of a woman [or man] who prepares food in this way and maintains a kosher kitchen . . . God can become almost as tangible as the stove.” (*Kitchen Wisdom*, 268-269)

We fail to fully understand if we think having the right kinds of food, having enough food, is just about feeding our bodies. It is also about feeding our very souls. It can be a tangible reminder of God’s love for us, and in turn, our love for God. Daniel and his friends understood that. They knew that it’s true: you are what you eat.

So what does this have to do with the problem of hunger? Plenty. For if Daniel and his friends were right, if how we deal with food is an expression of our relationship with God, then we who know God to be a generous God, a life-giving God, should be appalled at the fact that so many of our fellow Americans don’t have enough to eat! If we want to show the love of God in our lives, if we want to demonstrate the generosity of God, then there is no more dramatic way to do that than feeding the hungry.

Several weeks ago, on Mission Sunday, I spoke about the importance of doing whatever we can to help those in need. I talked about how God call each one of us, rich or poor, young or old, to live lives in service to others. I said that no matter who we are, there is something we can do to help out those in need.

Among those sitting in the congregation that morning, were many folks representing the various agencies with which we work, including Habitat for Humanity. In particular, the Habitat delegation included members of the family living in one of the house we have helped to build. After the service, the mother of that family came up to Pastor Susanna, and told her that she had been stirred by my call to action. She knew that some of the other Habitat families didn't have enough to eat, so she was going to organize a food collection among the Habitat families to help out their hungry peers. She is doing what she can to help.

Certainly our feasts at Thanksgiving and Christmas are also wonderful ways to do that. Our filling bag after bag for the local food pantries and shelters is a very practical way for us to reach out to those in need of a good meal. And our dishing up supper at the Gillespie Center is yet another way we can live out the mandate to feed the hungry. As long as there are hungry people we must do these things. We absolutely must. And to each one of you who help at the feasts, who bring in your grocery bags, who sign up to serve at Gillespie, I say thank you. Thank you so very much.

But let us not be misled. It will never be enough. Only when the system itself is changed, only when we as a nation rise up and say, "Enough!", only when we are willing to set in place the structures and programs that begin to seriously address hunger, homelessness and poverty, do we stand a real chance of changing things.

That Habitat mother is certainly not in any position of great power or influence, but she is doing what she can to help solve the problem. Many of us are in positions where we can do so much more. Those of us who are stockholders or employees, can impact decisions made by some of the largest corporations on the face of the earth and help ensure that all workers receive a living wage. Some of us are elected officials and can work for systemic change. All of us here can learn more about the problem and about the potential solutions. By volunteering to work with organizations that serve the poor, we can come to know the people most affected by hunger. You can vote for candidates who are willing to address the issues. And between elections you can write letters to your representatives in government and ask what they are doing to end hunger and homelessness. And to learn even more about what you can do, you can look up breadfortheworld.org on line. That will take you to the website of one of the premiere organizations working to end hunger around the globe. Breadfolrtheworld.org

As things were drawing to a close at the feast on Thursday, several of the folks in attendance started to scavenge. They filled their pockets and purses with the fruit on the tables, with left over bread, even with pieces of pie. I was glad to see the food

would be going to those who needed it. But I was also saddened when I remembered that Thanksgiving comes just once a year. And that the next day would, indeed, be a day of hunger for many.

This week, before you get caught up in the Advent and Christmas seasons, take a vow to work for that day when having enough to eat isn't just a once-a-year event. Remembering that food can indeed be a tangible reminder of God's love for all humanity, let us work to make every day, a day for giving thanks.

Amen
John H. Danner