

March 27, 2011  
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 58:1-12  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

The Fast I Choose: To Share My Bread With the Hungry

Our reading for today comes once again from the Prophet Isaiah.

I want to have us begin today by listening to a poem written by Lucille Morgan Wilson. 'In Any Language', is read at the beginning of The World Food Prize Celebration as a reminder of the purpose of their gathering.

In any language  
hunger is an ugly word  
There is no music in hunger  
The rumble of empty stomachs  
The monotonous whine of a child waste with disease  
The moan of the mother whose baby lies bloated and still in her arms  
Hunger is the listless den of apathy  
Bread of weakness  
The faded brown and grey of dead leaves after autumn has ebbed.

**Prayer**

**Scripture**            **Isaiah 58:1-12**

We have been walking with this text during this season of Lent. Thus far we have heard the prophet give voice to God's displeasure with the hypocrisy of his people. God's people are keeping the '*fast*' – abstaining from food – in order to come close to their God – in order to seek God's favor – but their motive, we find out is to '*serve their own interest*'.

They are going through the motions of being in relationship with God – showing up at the right times – saying the right words – giving the right gifts – while the rest of their lives show a general disregard and disrespect for their relationship with God.

In hearing this – our own acts of piety have been called into question. The motives behind our worship, our prayer, our study – have been laid out to be examined - in order to see if what we do is more about ‘serving our own interest’ than it is about serving our God.

We learned, last week, of God’s heart for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the victim, the voiceless, and the powerless. We learned that what God desires more than empty piety – is ‘justice’. *“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yolk, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.”* (Isaiah 58:6)

We learned that justice – is among other things about fairness and ‘sharing’ in order that all people – have what they need. It is about providing the things that make life secure – food, water, shelter, medicine, an economy that provides opportunities for people to provide for themselves and their families – the kind of safety that allow for long term stability.

Today – we look more closely at what it means to act justly – as we hear God say to us that the ‘fast that God chooses – is to share our bread with the hungry.’

About 10 days ago, my wife Donna, announced to me that she was not buying any more groceries for the rest of the month. (Just so you know we still have 3 days to go.) I was surprised and a little worried. She assured me that we had more than enough food in the house and it was time to use what we had. She was right.

We have a pantry – filled with food. A freezer and refrigerator – well stocked. If you didn't know better you would think that we had prepared for some pending but unspoken disaster. Maybe it is the same for you.

'Sharing our bread' is not simply about bringing a few cans of soup and dropping them into the shopping cart at the door. It not just writing the check or helping out at the meal program. 'Sharing our bread' is about facing our fears and giving more than lip service to the God who provides all things. It is looking at our lives individually and it is working collectively to make sure those who live in poverty (the root cause of hunger) will have 'bread' for their tables.

Let me share with you some statistics from 'Bread for the World.'

- Despite years of progress against hunger, in 2010, it is estimated that 925 million people suffered from hunger. This is due to a sudden spike in global food prices and the onset of a world-wide economic crises.

- In 2005, the latest year for which data is available, 1.4 billion people in developing countries lived in extreme poverty, or on less than \$1.25 a day.
- In 2008, nearly 9 million children died before they reached their fifth birthday. One third of these deaths are due directly or indirectly to hunger and malnutrition.
- We live in the world's wealthiest nation. Yet 13 percent of people living in the United States live in poverty.
- Nearly one in four children live in households that struggle to put food on the table. That's 16.7 million children.

Do you here the cry of the hungry?

God's call to us to share our bread with the hungry is about recognizing that God has provided enough – to feed the world – and yet those who 'have' – have an abundance of food at their disposal while those who 'have not' are going hungry.

In an article about the effects of budget cuts to the Federal budget and their effects on the poor in this week's Christian Century (March 22, 2011), G. Jeffery MacDonald of RNS (Religious News Services) reports that,

*... House-passed plans to cut about \$5 billion from poverty-focused international aid, \$2.3 billion from affordable housing, \$1.75 billion from job training, \$1 billion from community health centers, \$900 million from refugee programs, and \$390 million from low-income heating assistance.*

*Under current proposals, programs that target poor people would face cuts of much deeper proportion than other areas of the budget, according to Stephen Colecchi, director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace.*

In the same article MacDonald quotes World Vision director of advocacy and government relations, Robert Zachritz, saying,

*Cutting poverty-focused international aid by 26% as proposed would hamper disaster response efforts and would remove 13 million people from feeding programs overseas. (13 million people).*

You get the picture?

Now – before we blame this party or that party – this group or that group - or this movement or that movement for this legislation – McDonald cites a February survey by the Pew Research Center.

*... global poverty assistance was the only area out of 13 categories in which more respondents called for spending cuts (45 %) than called for a spending increase (21 %). What's more, cuts to global poverty assistance were equally favored by Catholics, evangelicals, mainline Protestants and people with no religious affiliation.*

Isaiah is not speaking to people long ago or far away – Isaiah is speaking to us today. And what God is saying to us is that if your worship and your Sunday Schools, if your prayer and your good deeds are simply self serving acts disguised in piety – I want nothing to do with it.

The fast I choose is to share your bread with the hungry.

Old Testament scholar – Walter Brueggemann, - in commenting on our text says;

*The action commended here is a ‘true fast’; it requires doing without, denying self, and giving things up in obedience. The neighborly actions urged here required a decision against self-indulgence – thus a mode of fasting.* (Westminster Bible Commentary, Isaiah 40-66, p 189)

The ‘fast’ that we are called to – will demand that we look closely at our lives – it will challenge our ideas about security and about priorities.

Cedar Rapids is a city with a population of about 120,000 people. - We are getting ready to build a flood wall downtown that will cost 104 million dollars – if the city has its way and builds a flood wall on both sides of the river the cost will go to 375 million dollars. (Rick Smith, The Gazette, March 7, 2011)

The flood wall, depending on its final construction will affect people both up stream and down stream from us.

I know that in the wake of the 2008 flooding that this is an 'emotional' issue for a lot of people – and it is an economic issue for the city. But what if – we as a community – said that we would live as we had always lived – without a flood wall. What if we said that we would help each other find ways to relocate out of the rivers flood plain – or if we would support one another's businesses – and we would pitch in and help out once again if another flood came.

What if Cedar Rapids said – no – to the 104 million or the 375 million – how many people could that feed.

Our friends Lori and Jim went to Ethiopia in the fall to make a first visit to the child they are adopting. While in Ethiopia they had the chance to visit with the family of the World Vision child they support. They left the family with a gift of 100.00. It bought for this family a cow and 2 goats. It was more than groceries for the week or the month or the year – it was an opportunity for food security.

When it comes down to it – it is really fear that keeps us from living justly – from sharing our bread – from trusting. As I think through it – there is more to the fear that keeps me holding

tightly to all that I have than a physical reality – (I am not going hungry any time soon – nor will I be without clothes or shelter.) There is a spiritual reality to it as well.

At the bottom of this fear of having enough – it is the question – for us ‘Do I – do you - trust God enough to provide what I need for today and for tomorrow so I can share what I have to make sure others have enough for today and tomorrow?’

To share our bread with the hungry – will call upon us to do small things – to bring the soup for the shopping cart – to send the check to the food bank – to serve the meal at the meal center. But will also call us to rethink our priorities and our policies.

Today we have a chance to act in a global way – we have a chance to write letters – in support of programs that will allow us – who have so much – to share our bread.