

Bread, Not Stone:
Hunger and Homelessness in the Land of Plenty
Beacon UU Congregation
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Mohandas Gandhi once speculated that with so many hungry people in the world, when God next comes to earth it will be in the form of a loaf of bread. My guess is that this loaf will be a simple one, as close to the integrity of wheat and water as it could be. Not like the fancy loaves we've come to crave from the plethora of specialty bakeries in our suburban midst –these days, our daily bread may very well be the sun dried tomato and olive loaf; the harvest bread studded with currants and walnuts, the buttery brioche, the sourdough French with herbs.

No. The sacred (whatever its form) will come to us, *does* come to us now and act through us, in the shape of the most unpretentious bread with the most common ingredients –the water of humility and the grain of compassion, kneaded by our justice-seeking hands, activated by the yeast of love, and baked in an oven of grace and gratitude.

Even in our relative abundance here in America, we hunger for this bread. We may set our tables with fine silver and gorge on cornbread or crescent rolls or biscuits during the upcoming Thanksgiving eating frenzy. Yet, still, we hunger for this simple life-giving bread. Our children are chubby from over consumption of TikTok, and yet, they hunger for this bread.

Millions of people in the world go hungry each day, many of them children; and they, too, hunger for this bread. Many families are one emergency away from hunger and homelessness. As Jesus himself asks, in the Gospel according to Matthew, I ask you now: "Is there anyone among you, who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?"

You may have been expecting me to say the following words this morning: "We are so very lucky." Why can't we just be thankful for that, sing some hymns, and count our blessings rather than recount our injuries. The pandemic has taken us on a hard and anxious journey. We're weary. Surely, in our individual lives, there are sorrows and burdens to bear, as well. Even so, many of us have reaped an unexpected harvest of simple gratitude for simple gifts from this hard growing season. And, at least by appearances, we have survived. Yet, some hardships are hidden or even invisible, and we'll get back to that later.

Not surprisingly, many American families would be thrilled this Thanksgiving to dine on one WEE Cornish game hen and a single scoop of mashed potatoes and one meager teaspoon of gravy, as long as they're able to break bread with loved ones in the warmth of their own homes.

With similar simply gratitude, we've gathered together this morning in this, our religious home, to say "Yes" once again to joy, to hope, to community, to our families, to the needy. We have come to say, "Here, among us, is bread, not stone. May it feed our collective hunger and sustain us." May it feed our commitment to be the bread, not the stone, beyond these walls, too.

Recently NPR aired a story about Elon Musk's response to being asked for 6 billion dollars to tackle world hunger issues. "So, what are you going to be able to do with \$6 billion dollars," he snarkily enquired. So, here's the scoop - .43 cent for one nutritious meal a day feeds 42 million people for 365 days. That's actually quite significant.

Imagine what Musk's billions, and the billions of Bezos and Zuckerberg and the odd Hedge Funder in Greenwich CT or mansion developer in Malibu could do. I would reckon all but wipe out world hunger, reduce the climate crisis and provide a liveable hut for every person in this country (cities are experimenting with this intervention now – small one person hut like structures in empty parking lots. Billionaires might tell you that they do their part that they, or their companies are philanthropic. And this is true. And they might add that it isn't just up them because they've got oodles of money to address systemic social problems. And, I would agree with them there.

We can't just throw money at hunger or homelessness. Because it happens where we live. It reflects whether we have created and sustained a civil and empathic society. If we are busy protecting what's ours (our property values, our view) at the expense of those who are hanging by a thread off the survival cliff...perhaps, because we are understandably worried about the state of the world, or we're just worn out from that worrying and compassion fatigue has set in. A question we can all ponder.

At least on the nights I've volunteered there, Jeff Bezos is not dishing up beef stew at the Flagstaff Food center. We are. Or, at least, we could. We have that opportunity. And many of you have been on the Beacon team the last Wednesday of every month. This week, Sue Strobel implored us on our google group to volunteer on November 24th. Will you consider it? If not this month, then some other month upcoming? You can find the link in the e-news or email Sue.

The Food Center serves a portable breakfast and lunch and a hot, very appealing dinner 365 days a year. Yes, you heard me right – 365 days a year...when I first learned that I was astonished and wowed. And I can tell you

that it is a humbling and leveling experience to volunteer there. It has opened my eyes and it keeps my heart massaged. Not everyone looks hungry, not everyone looks homeless or even poor, but some do.

There are patrons who sometimes arrive drunk, some are dirty and odorous, others have small children, some speak Dine, others with a backpack straight from work because they cannot afford enough food on their salaries. And everyone is treated with dignity. We don't press them on why they're asking for 5 dinners. Or two milks, or extra cookies. Because humiliating the homeless and the hungry by underscoring their lot is cruel and just not necessary.

Sometimes hunger and to a lesser extent, homelessness, can be invisible or at least, well masked. Some years ago, a woman who worked in my congregation told me about the years when her children were small, her husband was having trouble finding work, and they made one rotisserie chicken last a week. I tried to imagine that and it was demoralizing. Many well-educated, middle class raised folks are struggling, but they can class pass or at least not draw too much attention to themselves. And this speaks, again, to how many in our society label, otherize, and dismiss people on the edge.

Probably the closest I've been to hunger is when I had to eat mostly street food as a student travelling through Europe. But, um, having to eat Croque Monsiuer sandwiches in Paris is hardly the same as dumpster diving. Have you known hunger? When I was a member at the First Parish in Concord, MA we hosted an annual Oxfam dinner. Maybe you've attended one yourself. Here's how it works. If 100 people buy a ticket, let's say, that 100 is divided up into three groups based on how a percentage of the world population eats each day.

So, if you draw a ticket with "no meal" you're with about 10% of the world; "rice and water" – 40% of the world; a simple meal of rice and beans, perhaps with vegetables – 30%; and a sumptuous meal that includes meat – 20%. I once pulled a No meal ticket and having paid the same amount of money to attend, watched a fellow congregant eat a steak. It was painful and humiliating and scary, even as a hypothetical exercise. I went home and ate something. Another time, I ate rice and beans. Once, I had rice and water. Intermittent fasting is all the rage now. Imagine if fasting wasn't a choice. It was actually involuntary hunger.

During the pandemic, contractors were busier than ever renovating houses. Lumber was in short supply. People were irritated that they had to wait for their custom cabinets or their tile. All the while, working people in this city (everyone from mattress salesmen to professors to ministers (?)) cannot afford housing, mansions spring up along Woody Mountain Rd for weekenders, the city is awash in overpriced student apartments made of ticky-tacky, and there are more homeless people than ever.

Yes, I am new to Flagstaff (2 years now) ...maybe this is angering and you think I have no right as a “carpetbagger” Interim Minister to have an opinion about all of this. But, I would counter that with a reminder that it is my job, my calling, to talk about hard things and grapple with them with you, not apart from you.

I am comfortable enough. I have lots of food in my fridge. I relate to the internet joke –“Gotta get to the store to buy that bag of lettuce that will go bad next week unopened.” I have a home and it is warm and safe. What is my responsibility as a have to the have-nots? What is our responsibility as a beloved community to the forlorn, the needy, the other who scares us or might stir up contempt in us (more from fear of falling in to that hole ourselves, I would argue, than genuine disgust) ?

Have you watched the wildly popular Netflix series called “Maid?” It’s about a young mother fleeing domestic violence who becomes homeless? Or “Nomadland,” the Oscar-winning film about older folk who wander America in RVs seeking seasonal work? A reviewer called these productions, “Poverty Porn.” The question is: Do these programs tenderize us, further create otherness, or do they elicit a deep breath and a “There but for the grace go I reaction? On that score, I (we?) possess a chilling privilege of deciding on a case-by-case basis whether to offer money or food to the homeless of this city. It’s downright Dickensian.

I was looking at the 10 year plan for Flagstaff, and I’m scratching my head over the meager allotment of affordable housing. And its like that everywhere in America. Don’t get me started on Palo Alto, CA where a gorgeous development of 60 units for seniors was voted down, because in the words of one council member, “we need to protect the value of what’s ours.”

For October-December, Beacon will share the offering plate with **Housing Solutions of Northern Arizona and Sharon Manor**. Housing Solutions helps local residents identify and maintain safe, decent, and affordable housing. It offers counseling to help homeowners avoid foreclosure, credit counseling, pre-purchase assistance and works with AHC in constructing or remodeling homes using sustainable green building solutions.

Through Sharon Manor, the organization helps homeless victims of violence and their children on their journey out of violence and poverty and into economic independence, safety, health, and self-sufficiency. Domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness for women and their children in the United States (as the series Maid illustrates) Local shelters play a critical role in helping families in crisis, but they are short-term in nature.

Housing Solutions is currently remodeling a hotel to provide transitional occupancy for the homeless.

The impact for 2020 showed:

28 families obtained first-time home ownership
178 people received pre-purchase or credit counselling
113 received foreclosure assistance
25 rental units are occupied
78 found safety at Sharon Manor

I'm proud to serve a congregation that supports such efforts, dishes out stew at the food center, and recognizes our role in the response to these problems.

So, the bottom line here is not statistics, but rather whether, under the weight of pandemics and social chaos and climate crisis and other uncertainties and fractures, we can sustain the good will and the empathy to offer the warmth of bread, rather than harden ourselves into the cold stones of apathy and toxic individuality.

There are so many wonderful role models of community empathy – the guy here in Flagstaff who is reoutfitting a bus as warming station, food and shower source for the homeless; the people who have created little free food pantries (similar to little free libraries), the no cost cafes, the parking lot of livable huts, the non profits that keep the safety net intact or at least, viable.

As we commit ourselves to empathy, we make a solemn vow: “Here is bread, not stone.” Here is my spirituality, my beliefs made manifest in a morsel of bread baked within the hearth of my heart and conscience.”

In his book, *In Search of Balance*, John Robbins notes, “there are many forms of hunger. There is hunger for food, and there is the hunger for love, for purpose, for truth. There is the hunger for health, for happiness. There is the hunger for companionship, for inner peace, for the sense that we belong. There is a hunger for laughter, and there is a hunger for the sacred. The hunger that lives in the human heart is part of the kinship that threads us all together, we are interdependent beings with a profound need to both give and to receive from each other. For what one of us is lacking, another has in abundance, whether that be a loaf of bread, a skill or talent, wisdom, or a compassionate heart. Our urges and our gifts, our longings and our offerings, are all needed and are all indispensable.”

My colleague, the Rev. Bill Baughan tells a story that illustrates this interconnection. Years ago, he served a dwindling church of mostly older parishioners. One day, a woman came to him and said, “Pastor, we haven't had communion for a while and I miss it.” Being a newly minted, overly earnest minister, Bill wanted to know the theological significance of communion to the parish and so forth. “What does communion mean to you,” he asked. The woman replied, “I cut the bread.”

That's what it meant to her. She had a role, a place, and a gift to bring. She cut the bread and she herself was the nourishing bread. In turn, her need and her offering were bound together.

The Rev. Baughan reminds us: "If we are touched by the images of human beings starving for food, starving for comfort, it is because it is a reflection of our own need. They are reminders not only of that part of us that is hungry, but even more so, of the part of us that needs to give in order to be whole." Knowing this, I ask: "is there even *one* among us, here in this beloved community, striving to live our principles in the real world, who if *any* child asks for bread, will give a stone instead?"

May our welcome table be wide.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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