

A push notification from a local news app stopped me in my tracks on Wednesday. The headline read: ***NC Disburses \$413M in Summer Pandemic Food Benefits for Children*** (Patch.com). The article revealed that the NC Department of Health and Human Services will distribute one-time food vouchers of \$375 to help struggling families with summer food expenses for 1.1 million NC children. The article also reminded readers that one in five NC children are food insecure, meaning their families are not confident they can provide nutritious, sustainable meals each day. ONE IN FIVE!

Now that percentage isn't a surprise to me. It's been shockingly high for a long time, and I've made mention of it before. But when you begin to realize the percentage represents one million children, enough to account for every person in Mecklenburg County, and that nationwide that number balloons to more than 20 million children, there is an ache, and a numbness, and a shame for this reality.

There is most certainly a piece of me that commends the approval of these funds by our state – every penny is worth it to stamp out hunger. But it's appalling that we continue to allow our systems to fail the very people who are not only our most vulnerable citizens but who are also our deepest hope for the future.

I read this news blurb in conjunction with today's pericope from John's gospel, more details of Jesus as a bread-giver. Let me say that I know many of you will find some portions of this passage difficult, especially the second part, where Jesus, if taken out of context, indicates a kind of exclusivity and conformity of belief and behavior that is not in keeping with the inclusive and mysterious nature of our Creator. I share some of your discomfort, but I am not going to address that discomfort today. I

did address it in a previous sermon, which can be accessed in the virtual copy of today's sermon text.

(<http://sardisbaptistcharlotte.org/sermon/8838-2/>).

Instead, I want to focus on the first verse of today's lection:

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” (John 6:35, NRSV).

Some context: Jesus wants to use his audience's familiarity with manna in the Exodus story to provoke them to think about an even greater source of life.

God gave bread, manna, to the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. Don't me wrong, this was a remarkable gift. We need our daily bread and our daily watering to exist. And each week, this is a specific petition we offer collectively to our Creator. Give us something that keeps us alive, allows us to move forward.

But even this special bread spoiled. The Israelites couldn't store it up and take it with them. This bread didn't offer them freedom from their wandering; in many ways their reliance on manna kept them in the wilderness. But what this bread did help them to do was remember. It helped them remember that they were bound to one another, that they needed each other to move from the chaos of wilderness and wandering into the stability of home and stillness. The bread also helped them to remember God's presence and provisions.

The Israelites knew what it was to be a stranger, to be hungry, to be thirsty, to be captive, to be alone, to be afraid, to be dispirited. They

also knew of the power, mercy, and love of a God who was present with them through it all. And the religion that emerges from this struggle emphasizes a behavior and a practiced cult that remembers what it is to be vulnerable. People covenanted to be neighbors; to protect the orphan, and the widow, and the stranger; to practice Jubilee, a sacred rhythm of restoring land and people in every generation. In this way, they offered to one another the same kind of love and presence that God offered to them.

The bread-seeking kept them alive, but it also kept them in the wilderness. When the people decided to become bread-makers, people who vowed not to tolerate systemic vulnerabilities, they found a home, and they found themselves.

But Israel – that’s the earliest believers right on up to present-day believers – Israel lives in tension. Even though we know about God’s enough-ness, we too often long for Caesar’s consumption. We see the glitz of wealth while ignoring its neglect. We dream about the luxury of banquet, or of extra room, in our car, in our home, on a plane, or of extravagance, and we forget about the damage that such waste leaves in its tracks. In the Exodus story, the bread that gets hoarded spoils. In the real world, the bread that we hoard has a much more dire consequence. It’s not just that the bread spoils, it’s that our desire to take much, much, much, MUCH more than we need, spoils, inhibits, and damages the lives of our neighbors.

Jesus lived next to the extravagance of Herod, who exploited the region of Galilee for its hatcheries. Peasants labored in fields and cast nets for tiny wages, while Herod built summer palaces. Herod wanted people to believe that consumption is the most powerful act of humanity. Jesus knew that generosity is the most powerful act of humanity.

If you believe you must have more than your neighbor to have a sense of value in the world, then Herod has won. He tells you it's a zero-sum-gain world, so you need to fall in line, and let him be your provider. And besides, do you really wanna live in a world where Herod's not on your side?

But Jesus points out that Herod can't offer you anything with shelf-life. He can fill your belly today, and maybe tomorrow, too, but it comes with a cost: subservience.

"Whoever you are," Jesus says, "Come to me, and you'll never be hungry." Yes, Jesus is gonna share his table with you, but he's also going to share his life with you. He's going to tell you that you matter. He's going to remind you that the world is better because of you. He's going to remind you that God delights in your presence. You aren't gonna hunger for belonging.

"Whoever you are," Jesus says, "Believe in me, and you'll never be thirsty." Yes, Jesus will share his canteen. No, Jesus isn't asking you to take a loyalty oath. He's asking: "Do you recognize God in my presence, and in the presence of other neighbors?" This presence offers the kind of worth, and love, and longevity that you can't find in a water fountain.

Jesus is telling us that a community of collaborative, loving, faithful people, who acknowledge God's presence in their midst, acknowledge God's ability to put their unique gifts to use, and acknowledge a desire to do more than simply consume...this...this...THIS is the kind of place that offers living bread, living water, purposeful life.

What need have we for manna if we become manna ourselves? What need have we of systemic care or food vouchers for our children if we treat every child as our own? What need would any of us have for more if all of us had enough?

When we come into the presence of Jesus, especially in one another, and we believe in the presence of Jesus, especially in one another, we are gonna find a substance that fills us, that feeds us, that quenches us, and we will also begin to generate a substance that fills, feeds, and quenches our neighbors, too. It's called beloved community. And if we're doing it right, its boundaries expand ever outward.

Sardis, it's time for us to be manna in the world. It's time for us to be beloved community in the world. It's time for us to be the people God is calling us to be. Jesus says it can be so, if only we will come, if only we will believe, if only we will faith God's presence in the world, faith God's confidence in each one of us, and faith the Spirit's ability to transcend our lives and communities.

Friends, may we come to the Holy One, may we believe in the Holy One, and may it be right now.

Amen.