

Blessed Are You Who Are Hungry

Luke 6:20-22

February 2, 2025 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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When I was in my teens, there was a political candidate, whose name I have forgotten, who made a point of saying how many people in America were going to bed hungry every night. I don't remember the number he used, but today, it would be tens of millions of hungry Americans. His opponent responded, "I don't doubt it. There are probably that many people on a diet."

According to the charity No Kid Hungry, one in seven children in America lives with hunger. They may or may not have a meal tonight. Or their mom may go without so that they can eat. There may be no fruit in the house, no milk. There is likely food at the beginning of the pay period, but not at the end. These children may live in a food desert, with only convenience stores available to supply their food. Many children depend on the meals they receive at school to meet their most basic needs, but school doesn't serve every meal in a week and it doesn't last all year, and not all children are old enough for school.

Food insecurity in the United States is real. The five hungriest states are the ones you would expect: Arkansas is number 1, where 17% of the population is food insecure – that is, one in six Arkansans can't be sure of their next meal or don't have access to healthy food. Second is Texas, followed by Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina. But please don't think that all hunger in America exists down South. New Hampshire has the seventh highest median household income of all states. Seventh highest! Yet, even here, one in ten people is food insecure, and one in every seven children. There is hunger right here.

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Our scripture for today is from the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's version of the Beatitudes that we are more familiar with from Matthew. In Matthew, the Beatitudes are spiritualized. In contrast, Luke's Blessings concern, not the spirit, but the most basic needs for daily living. For example, in Matthew we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke, it is "Blessed are you who are poor." In Matthew, we read, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." In Luke, it is "Blessed are you who are hungry," and he even adds "Woe to you who are full now." Luke's Blessings make us uncomfortable, and they should.

We, who have plenty to eat, are more comfortable turning to Matthew for our blessings and pretending that Luke's version doesn't exist. But please don't think that Matthew's spiritualized Beatitudes are the "right" ones just because they are more familiar. Please don't think that Luke's version is "wrong" because you haven't heard it before. In fact, it is more likely that Luke captured Jesus' original, radical intention, and Matthew came along later and softened it. In Luke, Jesus' words comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, including us, and that is a message we sometimes need to hear.

In Luke, Jesus is talking about real, bodily hunger – the hunger of a mother in Sudan, a displaced person in Gaza, the hunger of a child in Arkansas or Texas or Meredith, New Hampshire. And Luke declares God's "preferential option for the poor;" as theologians say, God's intention that everyone have enough to live, and that no one have more than they need. God's invitation to count on God for providential care rather than our own overstuffed pantries. ... I want to own that I am preaching to myself here.

How are we to hear this, we who have enough to eat, who sometimes waste food, we who always know where our next meal is coming from? How are we to respond to Jesus' blessing of people who are not like us and his condemnation of us for being full? It pinches! We want to defend ourselves, maybe even get angry. But I would like for us to sit for just a moment with that discomfort, to hear Jesus' critique of our lives, his call for us to repent of our wealth, of our dependence on money and possessions for our security, his call to eat less, to waste less, his invitation to take part in the great and sacred project of feeding people who really need it.

At the very least, we are called to take our neighbors' hunger seriously, and not to imagine that all hunger in America derives merely from being on a diet.

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Well, I am happy to tell you that I am here to proclaim the good news, every single week, even this week. Because February is the month that we focus on helping hungry neighbors. This is the month that our Mission Board asks us to bring food for the local food pantries and to fill our own Little Free Pantry. This is something we can do. We love to do it. We do it well.

This year, our donations of food are especially needed because the Lakes Region Food Pantry in Moultonborough is no longer served by the New Hampshire Food Bank, and their shelves are bare. Our hungry neighbors will only be able to eat what we and others donate. So, please, bring non-perishable, factory sealed, non-expired food to share with your neighbors. Bring some food to share every Sunday this month, and pile it all up here in the chancel. Or write a check to the church with "Hunger" in the memo line, and we will take care of it for you.

Let's fill this chancel to overflowing. By the end of the month, I would love to have trouble getting to the pulpit for all the cans of soup and boxes of spaghetti and jars of sauce that we donate. Paper goods are needed, too, so I would also like to be dodging paper towels and toilet tissue and baby diapers. Let's rock this challenge! Let's be part of the great Kingdom project of blessing those who are hungry. And let's ensure that no kid from Center Harbor or Moultonborough or Meredith goes hungry on our watch. With God's help, we can do this!

Amen