

Provoking Justice

For several years now, we've taken note of a special organization on the third Sunday of October. I'm indebted to Charlie Scalise and Charlotte Keyes who suggested to me that we take part in the activities of Bread for the World and have led all of us in various ways to observe Bread for the World Sunday, to contribute to an offering benefitting that fine advocacy group, and in adding our voices in some years to the Offering of Letters that Bread for the World gathers every year. For those of you who may not have heard about Bread for the World or who may be fuzzy on what they do, I want to mention a few important points. The organization sprang from a meeting in October of 1972, when a small group of Catholics and Protestants met to reflect on how persons of faith could be mobilized to influence U.S. policies that address the causes of hunger. Since that time, they have become a powerful voice on Capitol Hill and beyond in speaking for the hungry and the sick among us. Bread for the World does not feed people directly; what they do is to help shepherd legislation through the U.S. Congress and other law-making bodies to put public dollars to work in relief and education efforts. Because of their work, others are able to feed the hungry.

Their website, www.bread.org, lists some recent victories. In 2012, as unprecedented budget cuts in human services were threatened by Congress, Bread for the World called on Congress to maintain a circle of protection around funding for programs vital to hungry and poor people. The House passed proposals that would have cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) by nearly \$170 billion over the next decade. Yet, after two years of budget fights and over \$2 trillion of enacted deficit reduction, Congress made no major cuts to programs for hungry and poor people. Congress also extended for five years the current Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit benefits—assisting millions of low-income working families. In 2014, Bread for the World's Offering of Letters on reforming U.S. food aid resulted in Congress allowing the government more flexibility in providing food assistance overseas. This greater flexibility and efficiency in food-aid programs is enabling U.S. food aid to reach at least 1.5 million additional people who are hungry each year. That campaign was timely because of the food-related emergencies that arose, from Syria to South Sudan and the Ebola crisis in West Africa.

Lest we forget the situations that this advocacy addresses, let me give you some of the latest statistics from our nation and our world on hunger. These statistics are from 2014, which is the latest year for which they are available. At that time, more than 48 million Americans lived in poverty or in households which struggled to put food on the table. The technical term is "food insecurity." More than 20 percent of the children in our rich country live in poverty or in households experiencing food insecurity. In 2014, 21.7 million low-income children received a free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program. But only about half, 11.5 million, also received a free or reduced-price breakfast through the School Breakfast Program, and only 2.6 million also received Summer Food Service Program meals during the summer months. More than 8.2 million low-income women, infants, and children received nutritious food, nutrition education, and health care referrals through the WIC program in 2014. That statistic touches me personally because I was recently reminded that Connie and Kit and I were part of a WIC-style program in Kentucky in the early '80s. We were awfully grateful for that food and formula at the time but it took us a long while before we would voluntarily eat Velveeta or polenta and I hope to never again drink powdered milk.

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Internationally, the picture looks like this: Worldwide, 836 million people still live in extreme poverty – on less than \$1.25 per day. Since 1990, global hunger has decreased by nearly half, but undernutrition still affects 795 million people and causes 3.1 million child deaths annually. Since the federal government's largest food-aid program, Food for Peace, began in 1954, more than 3 billion people in 150 countries have benefited directly from U.S. food aid. Since their establishment in 2002, McGovern-Dole International Food for Education programs have boosted school attendance and provided meals to approximately 28 million children in 37 countries. A population too malnourished to work suffers long-term economic consequences. A malnourished person can suffer a 10 percent reduction in his/her lifetime earnings, while countries can see 2 to 3 percent annual reductions in their GDPs. By providing people with the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty, we create a more stable world. For every 5 percent drop in income growth in a developing country, the likelihood of violent conflict or war within the next year increases by 10 percent. Bread for the World does not just work to feed people, they work for peace.

As I contemplate these statistics and the work of Bread for the World, it's pretty easy for me to see a comparison between our national situation and the parable of Jesus which I just read. Congress comes off looking a good deal like the judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. I confess that I get very angry with people who so loudly proclaim their Christian values and desire for a Godly nation and then ignore the hungry and the homeless and the uninsured and underemployed.

In this application of the parable, Bread for the World stands in for the widow. They are as persistent as she, calling again and again on the ones who have the power to grant restorative justice, the ones who can feed the hungry. Lest we forget, widows in the time of Jesus had no one to advocate for them. Only men were supposed to speak in public. The woman that Jesus tells of had lost her advocate. But she was bold enough to speak out for herself. Why? Probably because she was hungry or homeless. Her rights to property had died with her husband. If she had no son to work the fields, if the family that inherited her husband's land did not care for her, she was helpless. Bread for the World and other like institutions now speak up for the powerless and voiceless of our time. I am very glad that you as Good Shepherd Baptist Church also take up the cause that Jesus gave to his followers by giving money to this worthy organization, proving that you are indeed the sheep that feed the hungry and shelter the homeless rather than the goats who ignore them.

The problem with parables is that there is always more than one way to read them. I can't remember if it was when I was in seminary or at some point during my acting training but years ago I learned that if you really want to be sure to get most of the truth out of a narrative, you must read it from different perspectives. In this parable, it is very easy for us to identify with the persistent widow or at least to take her side in the story. But what if we take the perspective of the judge? Can it be that we really have more in common with this busy, overworked, in a hurry jurist? If we picture the widow not as approaching the judge in a formal courtroom but as assailing him in the street, shouting at him as he waits impatiently at the market gate for the crowd of petitioners to organize themselves, does this sound more like our own journey along busy downtown sidewalks where the panhandlers shove in front of us with their greasy hands outstretched for spare change? In place of the widow and the judge, can we see ourselves behind

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the wheels of our cars, looking out at the same shabby woman with the same sign at the same intersection day after day after day and why doesn't she get a job anyway?

In reading this story, I began to wonder, why did Jesus say of the judge that he neither feared God nor had respect for people? That doesn't sound like the kind of man who people would have sought out for justice in a village in Judaea or Galilee. Had he once been a different kind of man, sensitive to the plights of his neighbors, generous, thoughtful? Had he fallen victim to what we now call "compassion fatigue," so worn out by petitions from the unfortunate whose situations never seemed to get better that he could no longer work up any sympathy for them? Does he now begin to sound more familiar, more sympathetic to us? Can we begin to see ourselves not in the place of the widow but of the judge?

Perhaps the judge's problem was that he had lost heart. This is, after all, the stated point of Jesus' parable: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Perhaps one of the differences between the widow and the judge is that she, buoyed by her dependence on God, refuses to lose heart while he, thinking himself beyond need of God's grace, has fallen into despair. He is only roused to action by her consistent harassment of him. "...because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

Dr Greg Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, addresses this idea in his commentary distributed by Bread for the World. "As we look to the widow's example, we confront the reality of our own position. In the terms of Jesus' parable, those of us who are not vulnerable to hunger have more in common with the judge than with the widow. We enjoy the privilege of deciding whether or not to get involved, a privilege that relies upon our security as people who have more than enough to eat... As with the judge, our problem lies not in our ability but in our will to do justice. Confronted by the scope of hunger in our world, we might find ourselves tempted to lose heart, precisely the response Jesus warns against. Yet the capacity to end widespread hunger already lies in our hands – not as individuals but as citizens of the United States and of the planet... We face a hard truth: our question, like the judge's question, involves whether we are willing to execute justice. God, who has been so abundantly gracious to us, calls forth our capacity to seek justice for others." A former professor of mine and of Charlotte's, Alan Culpepper, puts it this way: "To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan and the stranger but do not [do so], the call to pray day and night is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives."

Hunger is indeed a problem of will rather than ability. The United Nations and many hunger-related organizations all report the same thing: there is more than enough food to go around. "The world today produces enough grain alone to provide every human being on the planet with 3,500 calories a day. That's enough to make most people fat! And this estimate does not even count many other commonly eaten foods—vegetables, beans, nuts, root crops, fruits, grass-fed meats, and fish. In fact, if all foods are considered together, enough is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person a day. That includes two and half pounds of grain, beans and nuts, about a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk and eggs."

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So, what's the solution? Like the widow, we must be persistent in our calls for justice in making the necessities of life available to everyone. Elected officials in our country and elsewhere, the powers that be, must come to regard us in the same way that the judge regarded the widow. We must pester them until they will do what is right in order to shut us up! As David Lose of Luther Seminary writes, in cases like this, "insolent, obnoxious, even intolerable behavior results in justice... sometimes it takes extreme, even socially unacceptable behavior to effect change. God, the Bible has persistently insisted, gives special attention to those who are most vulnerable; therefore, we should persist in our complaints, even to the point of embarrassing the powers that be in order to induce change."

Our Loving Creator, Jesus assures us, is on the side of justice. God, he says, will quickly grant justice to those who cry out. This was the experience of the helpless ones whose stories are chronicled in our Old Testament: Hagar, the Hebrew slaves, Hannah, and so many more. It was the faith of Jesus' own mother, Mary, who sang, "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." It is worth asking, is this the kind of faith that Jesus sees as lacking? "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Do we have the faith of Mary and of the persistent widow that God will hear our pleas and bring justice? Do we have the faith to persist in our search for justice when our government seems to have lost sight of the common good and seeks only the political ambitions of its members? Another commentator, Mark Davis, writes, "The demand for justice is often wearying and seems futile, because the powers that be often act with impunity – as if there is no moral order to the universe and as if there is no respect that one ought to have for humanity." Can we persevere nonetheless?

Persistence is important. I rediscovered a story this week about the persistence of a very well-known poor and elderly woman, though she was not a widow. It seems that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary and powerful Washington criminal lawyer. At one time, Williams owned the Washington DC NFL team whose nickname I will not repeat and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." They agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no. Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"

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In our persistence, we also do well to remember that the Biblical standard for faith is not that of intellectual assent but rather of an active faith that takes action according to the understanding of the will of God for our lives. Jesus never said, “Believe this list of things about me,” but rather, “follow me.” The persistence of the widow was not just in talking about her problem, although she certainly did that, but to go to the one who could help solve her problem. She took action. So, likewise, are we called to do.

It is important for us to pray, so that we do not lose heart. We should remember, always, that it is we, ourselves, who stand in the need of prayer. We pray that we might join in God’s work of creation, weaving back together the threads we have so carelessly cut, healing the wounds we have caused, often without evil intent but through not considering others closely enough, not being good enough stewards. We must respond to God’s call to care for the least of these, to work for justice without ever giving up. Jesus gave us the pattern to follow, humbly serving, feeding, healing those who crossed his path. May God continue to give us strength to be persistent, the insolent, obnoxious, even intolerable persistence of the widow, and through us may God bless God’s world. Amen.