

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

Bible Studies

Week One

Exodus 16:2-8; 13-26

“ELCA World Hunger Appeal: Addressing the Root Causes of Poverty”

God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery to the Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and the economic system that kept them oppressed. The Royal family, supported by the Egyptian military and priesthood, kept order in the realm by exploiting the labor of the poor and allowing the wealthier classes to enjoy the fruits of their labor. This happened in what was considered to be the “bread basket” of the ancient world, the Nile basin. In rescuing the people through the mighty acts of Passover and Red Sea crossing God was giving birth to a people who would be a contrast to the economic order they had left. Bringing them out to the wilderness, God taught the people a new way of living when the people began to complain about the food supply. God would provide quail in the evening and manna in the morning. What the people did with the manna was meant to establish a new way of economic sharing once the people reached the promised land. Each morning the people gathered enough for the people living with them in their own tents. Everyone had enough, no one had too much or too little. Those who collected more than they needed and stored it up found that it bred worms and became foul overnight. God also provided twice as much manna on the sixth day of the week to be eaten on both the sixth day and the seventh day, the Sabbath day, so that the people could rest from their work on the Sabbath. The manna stored from the sixth day to the seventh day did not grow foul. The people learned through this experience that the world as created by God is abundant with enough for everyone. Storing excess is based on fear of scarcity and does not honor the intentions of God. God provides in abundance enough that people are able to rest regularly from their labors. Honoring these learnings would enable the people of God to be a contrast to the economic order that they had left behind in Egypt.

Questions for Discussion

1. “Storing excess is based on fear of scarcity and does not honor the intentions of God.” How does this statement challenge you? How does this affect your willingness to be generous?
2. How do you relate to trusting God that the stored manna will be good on the Sabbath?
3. God has accomplished our rescue from sin and death by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and God provides us with all we need from day to day. Do we complain even in the midst of such rescue and provision? Why?

Week Two

Matthew 25: 31-40

"Relief: Responding to the Immediate Needs of People."

Jesus' portrayal of the judgment of the nations comes at the end of a long collection of sayings about readiness for the coming of the Son of Man. The good news within this particular saying is the invitation to those at his right hand to "Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you..." When one inherits, they have done nothing to receive but someone has died and left something to them. The blessed inheritors of the Kingdom receive as a free gift the life and salvation left to them by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They have received grace and mercy without works of their own. At the same time, it is because they have received such grace that they are empowered to produce the good works and good fruits of the Kingdom. They feed and offer drink to the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger and provide care and visitation to the sick and imprisoned. As they provide such care they do it for Jesus in disguise, the living Lord present with the hurt and broken of the world. Their work is not done to affect a relationship with Jesus, but to reflect the relationships he has already granted them by grace.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relationship between good works and salvation? Why do we produce good works and good fruits?
2. How do you encourage people to know the presence of Jesus in the hurt and broken of the world?
3. We are to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. Christ will bring in a new creation where all will have enough. How can this understanding help us to feed our neighbor now?

Week Three

Luke 9:10-17

"Development: Ensuring Sustainable Livelihoods"

Jesus feeding the five-thousand is a story that reminds us of two Old Testament stories: one is the Feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with manna following the exodus (Ex. 16:2-15), and the other is the prophet Elisha feeding one hundred people with twenty loaves during a famine (2 Kings 4:42-44). In both stories there was enough to feed all who were hungry and then some. The abundance that God provides is acknowledged and it is asserted that no place or predicament is beyond the presence and aid of God. So when the disciples urge Jesus to send the hungry crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find food and housing, he will have none of it. They are in a deserted place, and the disciples can only see the option of relying on the currently available marketplaces to meet the people's needs. Jesus challenges this notion with the command "You give them something to eat." Jesus echoes the words that Elisha used when faced with twenty loaves and one hundred people: "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" This command is met with resistance and faithlessness in both stories, but the Word of the Lord prevails and scarcity is transformed into a demonstration of the abundance of God to meet the present need and enough to give confidence for the next meal.

When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives bread to his followers he reminds them of the lessons learned by their ancestors in the wilderness story. He also points them forward to the shape of the Eucharistic meal that will define the church to come. In this meal Jesus forgives sins, renews his covenant, and challenges his followers to look beyond human limits and step out to the encouraging command, "You give them something to eat."

Questions for Discussion

1. The ELCA World Hunger Appeal uses the concept of accompaniment, walking alongside people, to help them recognize their God-given resources. How is this happening in our Gospel story?
2. God provides an abundance that we may not initially recognize. How did Jesus and the disciples look differently at what was available?
3. How does the Eucharist motivate and teach us to "Give them something to eat?"

Week Four

Mark 12:28-34

“Education: Learning to Love our Neighbors as Ourselves”

Up until this encounter with a scribe, Mark’s gospel has shown Jesus as being little understood by those around him. The disciples are able to claim Jesus as Messiah, but respond with confusion when he predicts his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus must teach them that the kingdom of God is not about being the greatest or being lord over another, but being last of all, servant of all, and one who welcomes a child in his name. When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for his final week he is encountered by the leaders of the religious establishment, who try to trap him with questions about taxes and the resurrection. Jesus responds by teaching them about a God to whom they should render up themselves, one who raises the living from the dead. Although Jesus at times seems weary of such a faithless generation that does not fully understand him, he continues to teach them diligently. At last, in this scribe is found one who shares a common faith with Jesus. They are in agreement that there is no greater commandment than the love of God and neighbor. Jesus’ response to the scribe joins together the “Shema,” the prayer of Israel commanded in Deuteronomy 6:5-6, and the love commandment found in Leviticus 19:18. The confession “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” cautions the hearer that there are many other forces in life that may demand our loyalty, but a wholehearted loyalty is to be given to God alone. This loyalty is demonstrated practically in the love of neighbor. To love our neighbor as we love ourselves is to offer the service and welcome that Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus and the scribe are able to share this faith and Jesus encourages the scribe with the words “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” The ministry that Jesus passes on to his followers includes teaching with such persistence that even in the midst of confusion and opposition, the Holy Spirit will move people to embrace the Great Commandment.

Questions for Discussion

1. What experiences or persons have taught you about hunger and poverty?
2. How have you shared what you know about hunger?
3. How can we be persistent in our teaching?

Week Five

Luke 4:16-21

“Advocacy: Proclaiming the Lord’s Favor for All”

After Jesus’ baptism, he began his ministry in the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and coming in time to his home town of Nazareth. There on the Sabbath day, he stood up to read and was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He chose to read the verses in which the prophet describes himself as being anointed with the Spirit to bring good news to the poor and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. The “year of the Lord’s favor” is a reference to the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. Behind the prophet’s message throughout the Old Testament was a call to return to the covenant that God had made with Israel after their rescue from bondage in Egypt. The people had not lived as a nation contrasting with their neighbors as the covenant had called them to do. The people sinned as individuals and a collective nation in their greed of gain, their exploitation of the poor, and their trust in their own might for national security rather than the promise of God. Isaiah, and Jesus in turn, were reminding the people of the covenant laws which were to reflect their status as a blessed people and ensure that there would not be anyone in need among them. The Jubilee year was to come after a period of seven times seven years, forty-nine years plus one, the fiftieth year, a time when “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” That liberty would include measures that addressed a major root of poverty in that day, namely when a family had to sell inherited land to pay off a debt and a larger landowner would keep them the family in service as laborers. The Jubilee year would serve as a correction to these events by releasing each community member from debt (Lev. 25:53-42), return land sold to pay a debt to the original owners (25:13, 25-28), and freeing slaves (25:47-55). This would remind the people that the land belongs to God and that they are a freed people who may not live as they once did in Egypt. When Jesus chose to identify himself with the message of Isaiah, he was announcing a time when the poor and the oppressed would be freed. His followers would keep the spirit of the Jubilee year in their love for neighbor.

Questions for Discussion

1. In a statement on “Global Hunger and Poverty” the ELCA World Hunger Appeal states that “the United States could significantly help in the fight against poverty by canceling some decades-old debts of the world’s poorest countries...” How would this work with the biblical idea of the year of Jubilee? Do you agree with this way of addressing one of the root causes of poverty? Why?
2. Do you know of any efforts in your community to advocate for those living in poverty?
3. What is the role of the church in attempting to influence public policy?