

A SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 26, 2006

BY

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SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

Lessons: Year B, The Common Lectionary

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19:7-14

Romans 7:13-25

John 2:13-22

The stories of the Feeding of the Multitude are the only miracle stories that are told in all four Gospels of the New Testament, and they are told six times within those four Gospels. As Cranfield notes in his commentary, "The fact that we have six accounts of Jesus' feeding a multitude in the gospels (two in Mark, two parallels in Matthew, one in Luke and one in John) indicates that the early Church regarded the feedings(s) as being among the greatest and most luminous for faith of the mighty works of Jesus."^[1] Indeed no other stories are repeated as much as the stories of the Feeding of the Multitude. They are rich stories which connect several theological themes into one meaning; the feeding of the Hebrews with manna in the wilderness, a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, anticipation of the messianic banquet, and the simple feeding of people who are hungry. The disciples are

commanded to continue the practice of caring for the hungry in the two commands of the Last Supper: “do this in remembrance of me”, and “love one another as I have loved you.” And perhaps most remarkable in the context of competing economic theories about how to feed the hungry, this is not a story about the redistribution of food, but the miracle of how a small amount of food, possessed by a few of those who are among the multitude, was multiplied to become more than enough for everyone.

The stories of the Feeding of the Multitude are stories of Jesus’ compassionate caring for those who are hungry and sick, women and children. He taught his disciples that they should do the same. To the degree that Jesus desired that his disciples repeat the fourfold actions that appear in the synoptic versions of this story as well as the last supper (that is to take, bless, break, and give bread), the stories imply a connection between Eucharistic theology and personal and political action.

A question that is appropriate may be, “Well that is well and good for the followers of Jesus, but why should government be involved?” In a democracy all people have a right, indeed a responsibility, to urge the government to enact policies that reflect their values. Over the past decade the United States government has become more open to the notion that religious values may shape public policy. The debates over abortion, gay partnerships, and even going to war, are often couched in the language of religious values, especially supposed Biblical values. Yet the values of the Feeding of the Multitude are having less and less influence on United States’ policy. These religious values are not given much heed in the political arena. This is particularly surprising given the importance the Gospels give these stories.

But a further case can be made for government support of the sick and hungry, women and children, in the founding document of our country, the Declaration of Independence. That document, while having its primary focus on the independence of the thirteen colonies from England, is also a declaration about freedom for all humankind. In the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (and by that we now mean women as well) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” the new Congress of the United States made a powerful statement about the freedom of every human being to exercise their rights. The Declaration later says much about government’s role in securing freedom. And the exercise of freedom necessitates the elimination of hunger and disease, particularly for women and children. In his book, Development as Freedom, the Nobel Prize winning Harvard economist Amartya Sen makes the case that poverty as much as tyrannical government leads to what he refers to as unfreedom.

Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states. Despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers—perhaps even the majority—of people. Sometimes the lack of substantive freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities. In other cases, the unfreedom links closely to the lack of public facilities of social, such as the absence of epidemiological programs, or of organized arrangements for health care or educational facilities, of effective institutions for the maintenance of local peace and order.^[2]

Removing these unfreedoms through the caring for the sick and hungry, women and children, should be consistent with the administration’s striving for freedom for every person. It is incumbent on Christians in a democracy to urge their government to enact

policies which are consistent not only with Biblical teaching but with the very core purpose of the founding of the United States.

Currently, 30,000 people around the world die every day due to extreme poverty. In response to this crisis some goals have been established, known as the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs. The purpose of the Millennium Development Goals is not to redistribute wealth, but to put safeguards in place so that individuals and nations can create wealth. The amazing and perhaps surprising fact is that the Millennium Development Goals are attainable in our lifetimes.

The Millennium Development Goals and their Targets.

Goal 1- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Target 1- Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people who live on less than \$1 per day.

Target 2- Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Goal 2- Achieve universal primary education.

Target 3- Ensure that, by 2015, people everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3- Promote gender equality and empower women.

Target 4- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

Goal 4- Reduce child mortality.

Target 5- Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

Goal 5- Improve maternal health.

Target 6- Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

Goal 6- Combat HIV/AIDS Malaria and other diseases.

Target 7- Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Target 8- Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of Malaria and other major diseases.

Goal 7- Ensure environmental sustainability.

Target 9- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources.

Target 10- Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Target 11- Have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

Goal 8- Develop a Global Partnership for Development.

Target 12- Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, nondiscriminatory trading and financial system (includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction, both nationally and internationally).

Target 13- Address the special needs of the Least Developed Countries (includes tariff- and quota-free access for Least Developed Countries exports, enhanced program of debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries [HIPC] and cancellation of official bilateral debt, and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction).

Target 14- Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing states (through the Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and 22nd General Assembly provisions).

Target 15- Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term.^[3]

President Bush has said that Jesus Christ is the person whose thinking he admires the most, yet his administration has changed its attitude towards the MDGs and does not now support their implementation. In 2005 two worldwide gatherings devoted much of their agenda to the MDGs, the G8 Summit in June and World Summit of the United Nations in September. At both events the Bush administration advocated abandoning the MDGs. Nevertheless, both bodies took several steps forward. These included a strong affirmation of the MDGs, a commitment by G8 leaders to significantly increase foreign assistance by 2010, and a new plan of 100% debt cancellation of the some of the world's poorest countries. Unfortunately, the foreign aid commitment will fall short of what is necessary to meet the MDGs. Likewise; the debt cancellation plan excludes fifty countries that are in critical condition and where debt is seriously hampering their efforts to achieve the MDGs.

Funding from the United States lags even further behind what is needed. The United States currently gives a smaller percentage of its GNP (0.16) to international development than any other industrialized nation. In fact, according the website of the Episcopal Church,

Funding remains largely stagnant for key development accounts as well as for vital health programs like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Even funding for the Millennium Challenge Account – a promising but thus-far poorly implemented initiative of the Bush Administration – lags well behind what has been promised to the world. Moreover, important U.S. health and development initiatives in the developing world currently are fatally hampered by ideological restrictions placed on them by the Administration and its allies in Congress.^[4]

By directing an additional ONE percent of the U.S. budget toward providing the most basic needs - and fighting the corruption that wastes precious resources -- we can help transform the futures and hopes of an entire generation in the poorest countries.

With an additional ONE percent of our budget:

- We can help prevent 10 million children from becoming AIDS orphans
- We can help get 104 million children into grade school.
- We can help provide water to almost 900 million people around the globe.
- We can save almost 6.5 million children under 5 from dying of diseases that could be prevented with low-cost measures like vaccination or a well for clean water.
- We can build a better, safer world for all.

ONE percent of the U.S. budget is \$25 billion, and redirecting that much money would have to be done over time. Directed to honest governments, private charities and faith-based organizations, this support would provide the tools and resources they need to really make a difference. American support would be part of a compact with poor countries who fight corruption and use their own resources to help their people out of poverty. American leadership would be an example for rich countries in Europe and Asia to do their share to help the poorest people in the world.^[5]

I ask all of you to join me in working for the Millennium Development Goals. If you would like to, please sign the ONE Declaration that is in your leaflet and place it in the collection plate. Please feel free to take a white ONE wristband from the basket in the middle of aisle, and wear it! When I take my ONE wristband off every night I remember that 30,000 people have died that day because of poverty. And when I put it on in the morning I pray that because of people who are working towards the Millennium Development Goals fewer people may die this day.

In a few moments Canon Carrie will take, bless, break, and give the bread of the Eucharist. We believe Jesus did the very same thing with bread at the Last Supper. As he said, "Do this for the remembrance of me" let us join with the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, yea even Pat Robertson, and go into the world and feed the

multitudes, for the remembrance of Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, the very Life of the World. Amen.

^[1] Cranfield, C.E.B., "The Gospel According to St. Mark", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, . 216

^[2] Amartya Sen, "Development as Freedom", Anchor Books, New York, 1999, p. 3-4

^[3] <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

^[4] http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3654_71627_ENG_HTM.htm

^[5] <http://one.org/WhyOnePercent.html>