

## **February 4th: Distribute**

This Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—which is a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.”

Over the course of the year, we’ve read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today. In January, we started a new phase of our lectionary texts,

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Before we dive into our text and our reflection together, let’s pray.

*Jesus our Generous Giver,*

*Your presence among us has always been a generous one—you were generous with your time, generous with your compassion, generous with your healing touch, and generous with resources. You have modeled for us what it looks like to*

*be people of generosity, and so today we dedicate this time to learning from your ways. We commit to being people who follow your example in our own time and place, so we are listening for the message that you have prepared just for us—the words that will move our hearts and move our bodies into action. Speak to us this morning, we pray. Amen.*

In my first pastoral experience, as an intern on the northwest side of Chicago, my supervisor frequently told me many of the world's problems are not problems of supply, but problems of distribution. I didn't think much about that statement at the time, but I trusted that over his decades of ministry he had acquired some perspective and wisdom that I wasn't privy to yet. And so I forgot about this piece of advice—and I forgot all about this idea of problems of distribution.

But when I was back in Chicago last week for a professional development conference, two important things happened: one, I met up with that internship supervisor for the first time in a few years, and two, I heard a sermon that sparked a renewed interest in the very real issues that are facing many of our neighbors right now.

I met up with my supervisor and his family for dinner at the Swedish restaurant across the street from the seminary campus, and we got to chatting about all the changes we've observed in our country in just the past few years. Our jobs have changed—Myron shifted into a new kind of chaplaincy, his daughter Linley has started a new career in teaching, and I have settled into the role here in Bremerton. We've changed as people—anxiety has spiked, budgets have gotten tighter, uncertainty has plagued us as we cope with the reality of new wars, upcoming elections, and ever present injustice. Even though we shared some deep and troubling thoughts, it felt like a holy moment, the kind of conversation that I'm going to be thinking about for a long time.

And then, one of my colleagues, the Rev. Eugene Cho, the former pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, was presenting on the conference mainstage in his capacity as the President and CEO of an organization called Bread for the

World. And although I had stayed up way too late the night before, I was immediately drawn into the narratives that he shared and the surprising numbers that were part of those narratives. For those of you who might be unfamiliar with Bread for the World, its primary mission is to educate and equip people to advocate for policies and programs that can help end hunger in the U.S. and around the world.

And hunger is a huge issue right now—more so than we might think. And it's an issue that doesn't just affect countries on the other side of the world, it has a deep and lasting impact on our own nation and the neighborhoods that are around us.

Just a few minutes into his sermon, Pastor Eugene shared the shocking statistic that last year, in the United States, the richest country in the world, 13 million of our children experienced some level of food insecurity or food scarcity. 13 million children in our communities, in our schools, in our pews, do not have enough to eat. 13 million children might not know where their next meal is coming from. Last year, almost 42 million Americans of all ages relied on a government program called SNAP—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in order to keep enough food on their tables. Pastor Eugene shared that as of right now in our world, we are seeing one of the worst hunger crises in the past five decades, and 45 million children around the globe are currently experiencing something called “body wasting” due to severe malnutrition and lack of access to care.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine the scale of that suffering?

Some of us might think that poverty and hunger are individual issues, but I think these numbers show us that this is not the case. I think some of our politicians would have us believe that lack of access to medical care and lack of resources is a personal failing—that we can place the responsibility squarely on the person who is “not working hard enough” or “not smart enough with their finances,” but I think it would be cruel to make that kind of generalization. It would be cruel to blame the vulnerable children who don't have enough to eat. It would be cruel to say that social problems like SNAP are unnecessary or

unworthy of funding, even if you've been sold a narrative that these programs are rife with abuse, when objective research has shown that they are not. It would be cruel to label this as an individual problem, when we can clearly see that this is a systemic problem that our society has created through our policies, our practices, and our own participation in this system. We have built institutions, complex supply chains, and regulations that make our hunger problems worse instead of finding solutions.

Because my friends, the truth is that there is more than enough food to go around. That might not be the case in the future, if climate change continues to devastate agricultural regions of our globe, but right now, we have plenty to go around. In fact, in many locations, we have a surplus, and these necessary resources go to waste. Cafes and restaurants in many places are required by law to throw leftover food in the trash, ugly looking produce is often left on grocery store displays, and I admit that I am part of this problem because bags of spinach regularly rot in my fridge before I can muster up the motivation to eat them.

We have a problem of distribution. The right people and the right resources are just not getting connected. The people in need are not receiving the excess that exists in other settings.

But Pastor Eugene and Bread for the World tell us that it doesn't have to be this way. We'll get to more about that in a bit.

At this point, you might be wondering, what does that have to do with our passage for today?

Well, as we've seen thus far in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is very busy with his ministry of teaching, healing, and traveling around the land of Israel—he's almost always on the move. He's in cities and towns, and along the coast. Everywhere he goes, the crowds seem to get bigger and bigger, as more and more people are interested in hearing what he has to say. By the time we get to Mark chapter 8, Jesus has quite the reputation—and we learn in verse 1 that yet another large crowd has gathered to hear him speak. In verse 9, Mark tells us

that the crowd was estimated to be four thousand men, with untold numbers of women and children.

But there's an issue with this crowd—this great number of people have come to him without any food to sustain them. In verses 2 and 3, Jesus says, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

The disciples respond to Jesus' compassion by saying, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

There's clearly a logistics problem here—another problem of distribution.

But Jesus doesn't seem fazed by this, he's not panicking or worried about how to fix this situation. Jesus jumps into problem solving mode and asks his followers how many loaves of bread they themselves are carrying. When they tell him that they have seven loaves of bread between them, he invites the crowd to sit down on the ground. Our story continues, "When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied." We even hear this concluding statement: "Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."

So what happened here? Was it a miracle that multiplied the loaves of bread and fish that were distributed amongst the crowd? Was it an act of generosity that inspired others in the crowd to pull out their own hidden supplies and share with their neighbors? Was it a combination of the two?

The truth is that our text doesn't really tell us the answer. Mark doesn't really specify the exact mechanism for how this meal is provided, nowhere in this story do we hear any of the characters call this action as a miracle. That doesn't mean that it isn't, but Jesus doesn't seem concerned with that particular label—he's much more concerned about the actual sharing of the loaves and fishes.

So regardless of how this meal came into being, I think what is most important for us to take away from this story is that in Jesus' presence, no one goes hungry. In Jesus' presence, all of those physical and social needs are met. In Jesus' ministry, equitable distribution is a priority. And I think from this situation and Jesus' response we can extrapolate that the same is true of the kingdom that Jesus has come to earth to inaugurate. In God's kingdom, no one goes hungry. In God's kingdom, all needs are met. In God's kingdom, equitable distribution is a priority.

So if we take a look at the world around us and the distribution problems that we are facing, I think it's fair to say that we have some work to do. I think if we take a look at our systems and our own actions, it might be clear that our current reality of excess and need is not what God has envisioned for God's people. This isn't the way that Jesus would want our communities to operate.

As you can imagine, I'd like for our personal application of this passage to revolve around attempting to fix this logistical problem that we find ourselves in.

But what can we do?

I think many of us are all too aware that the world is changing around us, and not always for the better. There are plenty of reasons to be scared, or on edge, or discouraged right now—so if you are feeling any of those emotions, you are not alone. There's a good reason that many of us are overwhelmed, and burned out, and struggling to make ends meet, and it can feel impossible to do anything about it or make meaningful efforts to fix things. I get that sometimes the weight of it all feels too heavy, too much to lift on our own, and too complex to find a solution.

And I do want us to recognize that systemic problems often require systemic solutions. If individuals aren't the problem, it makes sense that individual actions don't always work to solve the issue.

But I think Jesus shows us that problems of distribution can actually be addressed if we are willing to think creatively, work together, and have a little

faith. Because each of us is part of the system, we can affect meaningful change if we add up our individual actions and multiply them across our neighborhoods, our cities, and our nation.

So when I say that our verb for this morning is to distribute, I want us to think about both personal and collective uses of that verb. Each of us can distribute food via our Little Blue Pantry, or make a meal for a family in need, or buy someone groceries if we have a little extra that month. But I think that we also have the responsibility to distribute in other ways—by advocating for local food banks and donating when we can, by writing to our representatives in support of legislation that provides social programs and safety nets, by calling for changes to our food system, or by getting involved in causes and organizations that are working on big picture solutions.

Or maybe our work is to ask why there's a distribution problem in the first place. Maybe in order to build a better world, we have to diagnose and treat the symptoms of our greed, our selfishness, our lust for power. Maybe before we can distribute our resources well, we need to figure out why some of us hoard resources to begin with.

My friends, we don't have to solve the distribution problem this week, we're not miracle workers like Jesus. But if each of us took a small step, did one thing, took action in one way, distributed our resources with intention and solidarity, we might get closer to the more just, more equitable, and more loving world that God desires for us.

Amen.