

More than a Spiritual Exercise

Preached by

Rev. Dr. Linda Even

United Church of Fayetteville

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First Sunday in Lent

For Reflection: *"God, to those who have hunger, give bread, and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice."*
Prayer from Latin America

Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Gospel Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon: More than a Spiritual Exercise

The lectionary brought together an interesting combination of texts this morning: a direction for feasting and enjoying bounty and the traditional gospel reading for the opening days of Lent, which includes among other things, Jesus' 40 day fast and his resistance of what must have been an exceeding temptation to accept and take the bread.

Today, we live among such extraordinary bounty that for us, most of the resistance is required to skip the bread, the pasta, the extra dessert ... With all the gluten-free, paleo, vegan, vegetarian, omnivorian, clean eating, keto diets out there, we have turned our feasting into a religion of sorts, yet we find the idea of a fast smacks of some kind of excess religiosity.

A few weeks ago there was a lengthy article in the *Post-Standard* by a columnist who took the "Core Life 21 day Challenge." For this promo-introduction, he was able to buy \$250 worth of meals for \$100.00, which carried him through the 21 days (but would obviously cost \$250 every three weeks on an ongoing basis.) It was undoubtedly clean, quality, probably organic, non-GMO food. It wasn't nearly as much food as we are accustomed to eating, as there was a fast day every week and a near-fast day every week (dinner only). As I read the article, I was glad he didn't work for me, thinking he should consider himself lucky to have a job writing about the experience. Other than taking time to poke fun at CORE employees who didn't know how to pronounce *poke* bowls, if the man thought about anything but food, of how self-righteously proud of himself he was, how annoying he made himself to friends and colleagues, and how he was getting along without food in the 21 days, there was no evidence of that in his writing. Yet, because this wasn't a religious activity, this fast is socially acceptable in these days and no doubt some found it admirable.

There is another kind of fast that is not religious and shouldn't be socially acceptable, but to the degree we allow it to happen to someone else it is, it is tacitly acceptable. That fast is the one kept by those who live with food insecurity every day. If a man who could have changed his mind, who had the money to buy the meals and who was getting healthy food was obsessed by the idea of eating for the entire three weeks, what must life, working and learning be like for ones who have no such choices, who live with chronic hunger and insecurity about where their next meal is coming from? For them going with our food is far more than a dietary option or spiritual exercise.

According to the Food Bank of Central NY, in 2017, 181,000 people were food insecure in their eleven county service area. 181,000! Among those nearly 30% are children 18 or younger. Translate that to our church household—ten of the 30 children on our rolls are hungry or need food assistance on a regular basis. 16% of households include an active member of veteran of the military. We are clearly thankful for their service. 43% of those households have to choose between buying food or paying for medical expenses, utilities, rent or mortgage or transportation/fuel. Note: They are not choosing between paying for food and destination weddings, vacations, cutting edge electronic devices or other "frivolities." 60% of the households in the eleven county area in which we live have incomes less than \$18,000 per year.

Yes, those numbers are affected by Syracuse having one of the highest poverty rates in the nation; by the rural areas surrounding us, which provide many of our farm to table dining experiences and by being close to Fort Drum. If any of those things are an acceptable excuse for those kind of numbers, they elude me.

While Fayetteville Manlius expectedly fares better, there are still 1 in 10 children living in poverty. (Curious thing about that statistic – it indicates no children under 6 are living in poverty. Do we think that is a fact or rather that the level of poverty in many households doesn't get recognized until children start school?) Here in our church home that would mean only three of our children are poor and hungry. If it were fact, it would not be acceptable here and shouldn't be acceptable anywhere. Another 10 % of the population living in poverty in Fayetteville Manlius is over 75 years old. Poverty bears many ill-effects, one of them being food insecurity.

On the other side of the equation, what about those of us who have enough food? Americans throw away \$165 billion—\$165 Billion—worth of food each year. That breaks down to 300 pounds of food at an average value of \$2200 per household per year. 20% of the food we buy is never eaten and 40% of the food produced in this country is wasted every year. That includes food at every level of the production process – food left in the fields because of spoilage, because it isn't pretty, because there isn't labor to harvest it, or because growers/producers would lose money by bringing it to market. Food waste in this country has grown by 204% since 1960 and by 50% since 1990. Reducing that waste across the board by just 15% would feed 25,000,000 people.

I'll be providing information in bulletins weekly about how to reduce household waste and in what ways we might be in conversation with our local food suppliers, so that in partnership with them, we might help reduce waste, while they still make a living. Let us consider putting the money we save from reducing waste to effective use – through our OGHS offerings which has a focus on the bountiful food we have available to us and in our contributions to the food pantry. Just think, if we are only half as wasteful with our food as the average American household, this congregation alone could contribute \$60,000 to hunger ministry organizations, simply by reducing our household waste.

Bread for the World president, David Beckman once said that "We will not food pantry our way out of hunger." He was not demeaning the important work that food pantries do, but rather saying that a coordinated effort on a number of levels through food management, reduction of waste and policy matters all effect food availability and distribution. Also throughout the season, we will be providing information about the scriptural mandates to address hunger and how we might change our own behaviors or be active in other ways to make meaningful changes in our own community and state.

People are often fond of quoting the familiar text from the prophet Isaiah: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" Unfortunately, it is often quoted as an excuse both for not engaging in a fast of any sort and for not actively doing justice—justification for settling for warm and fuzzy feelings.

This Lent, we are challenged to have our religious fast be a fast from food waste, and a fast from the casual acceptance that some people in our community are chronically hungry. This is a fast acceptable to the Lord.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Most compassionate God: we pray for the peoples of nations at war, for populations torn apart by drug wars and use, the living, the dead, the missing and those who wait...

For those who work passionately and risk their own lives for the greater good, for human dignity and safety, civilians and military...

For the first, second and third waves of emergency responders and for all the compassionate volunteers to come...

For all peoples, governments and nations to act with forgiveness, generosity and honor...

For a grievously wounded planet...

For ourselves Lord that we might have the grace to work for that for which we pray with hearts and soul and with the words your son taught us to SAY together...

The Lord's Prayer