
Christian Communion and Hungry People

1 Corinthians 11:20–26 and Matthew 21:23–32

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, October 1, 2017,
by the Rev. David Beckmann

It's an honor and a pleasure to be with you this morning at Duke University Chapel.

My sermon is about Christian communion and hungry people. I'll begin and end with the two Bible passages we've just heard, but the middle of my sermon will be about the possibility of reducing hunger and how you can help to make big changes for hungry people through advocacy.

This is World Communion Sunday, and the passage from 1st Corinthians (11:17-26) is about Christian communion. Paul repeats the words Jesus said at the first communion meal. "The bread is my body broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you."

The beginning and center of Christian communion in the forgiving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us. When we take communion this morning, we are powerfully reminded that God, in Jesus Christ, reaches out and embraces us. God's communion with us then moves us into communion with other people—people on the other side of the world, different racial and ethnic groups, and certainly all the people who must struggle just to feed their kids.

Some of the first-century churches started their worship with an actual dinner that led into the Lord's Supper. But in the church at Corinth, some people ate and drank to their fill while other people went hungry. St. Paul says that if we ignore hungry people, our sacrament is sacrilege.

We all know that there is lots of severe hunger and poverty in the world. North Carolina is the 10th hungriest state in the country: 15 percent of the families in North Carolina run out of food sometimes.

But I think the most important thing to know about hunger is that hunger is on the decline. By all measures, the world has made unprecedented progress against hunger and poverty in recent decades. Those of us who believe in the God of the Bible, the God of history, must see this as an experience of our loving God in the world. It's a great liberation, like the biblical exodus.

In our own country, progress has been slower, but there has been progress. The rates of hunger and poverty in our country today are about half what they were in the early 1960s.

So we've made progress, and we can make more progress against hunger.

There are lots of ways we can continue progress against hunger. Parents can work hard to make a better life for their children. Businesses can provide jobs—good jobs. Community groups provide essential one-on-one services to people who are struggling.

But we also need to get government to do its part. We cannot make the progress against hunger that God has made possible unless the U.S. federal government is doing its part.

Bread for the World is a Christian advocacy movement to end hunger. Bread for the World includes Christians of all stripes, and we work in a bipartisan way. About two million people are now engaged in advocacy with Bread for the World.

I think the best way for me to explain Bread for the World is to tell you stories about two exceptionally effective Bread for the World members.

Pat Pelham of Birmingham, Alabama, got involved in Bread for the World in the late nineties. As she was praying one morning, she felt powerfully called to help Africa. She had young children, and her husband's job was in Birmingham. So she had no idea what to do. She asked her pastor, and he suggested she get involved in Bread for the World.

At that same time, many of the poorest countries in the world, mostly in Africa, were struggling with impossible debts, and some church groups were organizing a campaign to get some of that debt reduced. Birmingham's member of Congress, a conservative Republican named Spencer Bachus, was chair of the congressional committee with jurisdiction over this issue. So Pat and several friends from her church reached out to Spencer Bachus. Lots of people all across the country were, at the same time, reaching out to their members of Congress.

Surprisingly, they convinced him, and he became a champion on the issue of debt relief. Over the next several years, Pat and a growing network in Birmingham organized support in about 20 churches and from the editorial page of the *Birmingham News*.

By all accounts, international debt relief was an effective initiative. The recipient governments were required to use the money it freed up on basic education and health care for their people. A number of African governments expanded primary education, and ten years later 50 million more African children were in school. A whole generation of girls learned to read and write, add and subtract. And debt relief helped to set a new direction in Africa. About half the countries in Africa have been able to make major strides against poverty and hunger.

I don't see how debt relief would have happened if Pat Pelham had not responded to the ambitious call she heard in her morning prayers.

Dave Miner is an anti-hunger activist in Indianapolis. He has worked for years to involve other people in service and advocacy for hungry people.

This year, President Trump and Congress are pursuing unprecedented cuts in virtually all the U.S. programs that help hungry and poor people in our country and worldwide. President Trump's budget proposes to cut \$2.5 trillion over ten years from programs that help people of limited means in our country and internationally.

But \$2.5 trillion is a big number. Nobody can imagine what it would really mean. So Dave decided to focus on just one proposed cut in the budget of the House of Representatives. They want to cut \$150 billion from SNAP (food stamps). Dave calculated that this just this one cut would translate into the loss of 50 million meals for kids, seniors, and veterans in Indiana. He felt called to a long fast. He is giving up 50 meals—that's 16 days of not eating—one meal for every one million meals that the House budget would take away from kids, seniors, and veterans in Indiana.

Today is the eleventh day of Dave Miner's fast.

Dave's fast is getting attention, especially in Indiana, and he has so far been able to share his concern directly with his state governor and one of his senators. And I share his story with you, because Dave's fast dramatizes for all of us just how dangerous the current political assault on hungry and poor people is.

I'm not asking you to fast for 16 days. But I am asking you to write letters and emails, make calls, to your members of Congress. Lots of evidence shows that our members of Congress really do pay attention to what people from home say to them.

You can also become part of Bread for the World. Then you will be part of a collective Christian voice, working with like-minded people from all across the nation. You can connect with Bread on our website—bread.org—or you can pick up a membership brochure at the back of the church as you leave. As it happens, the two senators and two representatives who represent this area in Congress are all exceptionally influential on issues that are important to hungry people.

After church, you can join us in the Duke Chapel conference room for a short meeting on strategy. There's an active Bread for the World group here in Durham, and the Durham hosts a state Bread for the World conference every year.

In this turbulent, dangerous time in our nation's politics, I think God is also calling Christian people to get more active in electoral politics. Pick a good candidate and contribute time, money, and votes.

Finally, let me go back to today's gospel lesson (Matthew 21:23-32). The first lesson grounded us in the forgiveness that we experience through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In today's gospel lesson, our Lord tells us, in no uncertain terms, to take action. The son who professed loyalty to the father, but didn't actually do the work, didn't please the father. Jesus tells the Pharisees—and us—what John the Baptist announced: the kingdom of God is coming in the world right now; get with it; make yourself part of what God is doing. Amen.