Sunday January 11, 1976

"HOW TO FEED THE HUNGRY" Luke 4:1-4, 14-19

Sometimes we who live in the midwest and in one of the largest food producing states--Nebraska, have difficulty in recognizing that shortage of food and hunger are problems which are present in much of the world. Overpopulation, underemployment, crop failures, drought, lack of knowledge about good farming methods, and inflationary prices for food, energy and fertilizer have caused large numbers of people to sink into famine, poverty, disease and despair.

In actual numbers there are more hungry and starving human beings throughout the world in our time than ever before in history as we know it. Statistics on the immensity of the hunger problem are overwhelming. It is estimated that 60% of the world's 2 1/2 billion people are malnourished, physically underdeveloped and poorly educated. Twenty percent of the world's people are believed to be starving at this moment. Furthermore predictions are that unless a lot is done, the problem of hunger and starvation will get worse in the coming years rather than better.

What's all this got to do with us who say we are Christians and base our faith on what the Bible says?

To begin with, the Biblical witness is plain in regard to those who are hungry and poor. In the Psalms we read: "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise, says the Lord. I will place him in the safety for which he longs." (Psalm 12:5)

The prophet Isaiah tells us, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord and the poor among people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 29:19) "For thou hast been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress." (Isaiah 25:4)

The fact that God will not forget the poor or the hungry does not imply God's acceptance of their condition. God loves them in order to deliver them from hunger and poverty. Hunger and poverty are regarded as evils and God's response is to deliver his people from them.

The message of the Bible is plain. We as Christians are to have special concern for the poor and the hungry because God identifies with them.

In the Old Testament, the rights of the poor and the hungry are spelled out most clearly in the law codes. In the book of Deuteronomy we read: "There will be no poor among you. . .if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God. . . If there is among you a poor person, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against the poor, but you shall open your hand and lend them sufficient for their need. You shall give to them freely and your heart shall not be grudging. For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother or sister, to the needy and the poor. . ."

The Bible suggests that if a community were perfect there would be no poverty or hunger, but since Israel, like all human communities is not perfect, some of the inhabitants would inevitably be poor. Therefore God's people are commanded to care for them. This task is part of what it means to be the people of God and it is not an optional activity. At the same time, the community is to work at being the kind of community where there will be as few poor and hungry as possible.

So the sermon is entitled, "How to Feed the Hungry," not shall we feed the hungry.

In the Old and New Testaments there were methods spelled out for dealing with the poor and hungry of that time. Major attention is given in the Bible to the provision of food for the hungry. The poor could pluck grain or pick grapes when passing through a field. They also had the right to glean in fields and vineyards and to take any grain or fruit left behind. Owners were urged for the sake of the poor, not to be too efficient in their harvest.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus identified with the poor and the oppressed. Part of our scripture lesson this morning is the text Jesus used for his public announcement of the beginning of his ministry.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

The text implies that one test of whether or not the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, is how to deal with the poor and the hungry.

Jesus often associated with the poor and with society's outcasts and was criticized for it. In his preaching, he spoke with concern for the poor and the hungry and proclaimed that God had a special concern for them.

Perhaps his most striking parable in this regard is in Matthew 25, where Jesus implies that the way we treat ~~people~~ the poor and hungry is the way we treat God. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

Furthermore it is the Biblical witness that salvation is found as people recognize and work for the health and wholeness of the society. Great importance is placed on human freedom and responsibility toward solving human problems like hunger. We are not just to sit back and wait on God to take care of it in some miraculous way.

One of the temptations Jesus had to resist as he was preparing for his ministry was that of turning stones into bread and trying to save the world in that way. He realized that we human beings do not live by bread alone. Merely to give handouts is not enough. We have to help people to solve their own problems and in so doing find joy and meaning in life.

The problem we face then as Christians and as human beings, is not the question, "Shall we feed the hungry," but "How to feed the hungry."

During the past several months, I've been reading every article I can find on the hunger problem and suggestions as to how to work toward its solution. One thing is certain, there are no simple easy answers. It's not a matter of just raising more food and then giving it away.

A part of the answer often mentioned is the need to limit births through various methods of "population control." If there are less people to feed on the earth, there should be more food for those who are here. But there's still the problem of how to get food to the hungry in such a way that it is as helpful as possible.

There is also evidence that overpopulation is not so much a cause of hunger and poverty as it is a symptom. India

is an example. In spite of the fact that India has been a favorite target of family planning experts and population control programs, her population continues to soar and her poverty deepen. One social anthropologist who looked into the reasons for the failure of family planning in India, found that the villagers were trying to solve their poverty problem precisely by having large families. Most of them use the labor of their children within the village and over a quarter of the families resort to emigration of their sons to the cities to supplement their family income. Thus they are not very receptive to contraception.

The poor in India, are those with the least land, and the less land a farmer has the more labor per acre he needs; for he can neither afford labor saving machines, nor are they economical for small plots. As one farmer in India put it--"Children cost less than paying for hired labor." Thus large families are one response to the situation in which the poor Indian farmer finds himself. Thus if the small family is to be made a rational choice for the Indian, then the pattern of land ownership as well as farming methods must change and a pre-requisite for that is no less than a change in the social structure itself.

Furthermore, fertility rates are often related to other cultural traditions. In many cultures, men achieve a sense of their own masculinity through siring children--especially male children--thus a woman might become pregnant several times in order to produce a male heir to carry on the family name and tradition. Cultural changes in such matters are not easily made.

So we see that simple answers like population control are never simple.

We also have to be careful that some of our other seemingly simple solutions do not in the long run only make the problem worse. People who have studied the hunger problem warn us, for example, that in some instances simply giving more famine relief will only cause more people to die of disease and starvation in the long run.

For we Christians then, the question of "how to feed the hungry" is an important one. We are under obligation to feed the hungry, yet with our good intentions we want to do more than make the problem worse.

What then can we do here and now and in the long run?

1. First each of us as Christians has the moral responsibility to avoid the waste of food, energy and other things as well. In the past several months, newspapers have carried a number of stories which document the enormous waste of food.

In one actual study done in Springfield, Oregon, student volunteers in "Project Waste," found that in one day the students in nine schools threw away 511 half pints of milk. If applied to the 180 lunches in a school year, that would total 92,070 cartons or enough waste to supply the total daily protein needs of 57 children for an entire year. Multiply that by the schools and cities across the country and the waste is astonomical.

Another study done in Tucson, Arizona, showed that the biggest food wasters weren't the poor or the rich, but the middle income families. In Tucson, the study found that families there on the average waste 10% of the food they buy, and in some middle-income neighborhoods the waste was 25%.

Furthermore, more than half the food thrown out was found to be straight waste--whole slices of bread, large chunks of edible meat--not inedible table scraps. It was found that the citizens of Tucson,throw out 9,500 tons of food, most of it edible each year. This comes to a waste of nine to eleven million dollars or eighty to one hundred dollars per household. Each week the citizens of Tucson, throw away enough edible food to provide a week's worth of meat, poultry, or fish for more than 3000 people. Again, multiply this by the cities and towns all across our country and the total waste is enormous. Whatever we feel about the hungry, it is immoral for us to be wasteful. The fact is also that whether we are wasteful or not, most of us could eat less food and not damage our health, in fact, we would probably be helping our health.

2. A second thing that we Christians can do is to give aid to some of the extremely creative projects which the church is carrying on around the world to combat hunger and poverty.

A few weeks ago, Gretchen DeVries, a U.C.C. missionary from Cortland,Nebraska, spent an evening with some members of our church. She is involved in a project call the Rural Asian Institute. This Institute trains Christian

leaders from various parts of Asia in matters of crop tillage and animal husbandry which is suitable to their own climate, land and technology. It prepares these leaders to return to their small villages and rural areas and to teach the people there how to irrigate, how to make better use of the soil, how to raise a better hog or chicken, how to raise a better crop of rise; in other words it trains people how to help themselves in ways which will fit in with their culture, climate and land.

This is not the story of the "ugly American" going in to spend American government money by the millions with little or no long range effect. It is not an effort to transplant western technology in an eastern culture. It is an attempt to provide methods and tools cheap enough so that they are accessible to virtually everyone, which are suitable for small scale application and which are compatible with a person's need to be creative. It takes into account that we do not live by bread alone.

Such self-help projects as these are based on the premise that workplaces have to be in the areas where people are now living and not primarily in metropolitan areas so that they have to move. Also it is recognized that production methods have to be relatively simple but efficient.

The long run way to work toward solving the hunger problem is through such projects as these. The money that is needed and used in such institutes goes toward scholarships so that the persons who need the training and who can go back to their own communities and train others can attend the school.

3. A third thing all of us can do is to involve ourselves in a serious study of the hunger problem. We will be giving you opportunities to do this throughout the year. We do not have any simple answers and Christians may often disagree on the best short and long range solutions.

But at the same time, we Christians have the faith that by doing whatever we can and by using our God-given creativity, we human beings can with God's help create a better world. Amen.