

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Feed the Hungry
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
July 28, 2019

1 Kings 17:7-16; Matthew 25:35-40

I want to begin this morning with a poll. You can respond by simply raising your hand. First, how many of you had dinner last night? Second, how many of you had breakfast this morning? Third, how many of you still have food in your pantry. Finally, how many of you have access to a close-by grocery store? Your polling results show that you are food sufficient and so probably would have a difficult time fully relating to our morning's story in 1 Kings.

As a reminder, this story is part of the Prophet Elijah cycle of stories. As this story begins, Elijah has been hiding to save his life. He is hiding because the King and Queen of Israel have essentially put out "Wanted Dead or Alive...Preferably Dead" posters. While he hides, a severe drought has enfolded the nation. He survived by drinking water from a wadi and getting his meals from ravens...long story. Finally, though the wadi dried up and he was forced to leave. Following God's instructions, he headed to a local town to meet a widow who would feed him. When he arrived and asked for food, the widow told him that she had only enough meal for herself and her son, and that when that was gone, they would starve because there is no more food. What this meant, was that Elijah was at risk of starving as well. For most of us, the thought of starving to death is simply not on our radar. Yet in the ancient world, starvation was always near at hand. It was part of life. All it took to unleash hunger and starvation was a drought, a plague of locusts or a foreign army taking crops and livestock. But for us, with ready access to food, this story probably doesn't resonate...yet it would probably resonate with more than forty-million people in the United States.

I say this because forty-million Americans struggle to have enough food to feed their families. Fifteen million are what the government calls food insecure, which means that they are not sure where their next meal is coming from. One in six children in this nation do not know where their next meal is coming from and those children have higher rates of asthma, depression, anxiety and do more poorly in school. Though there is a higher percentage of households with children that suffer from food insecurity, still one-in-ten working adults struggles with hunger. Through a combination of rising rents, higher food costs, lack of medical coverage and low wages, food is often the last thing to be paid for. And just a note, food insecurity is not simply an inner-city problem. There are higher rates of food insecurity in rural areas than in urban areas and the suburbs are quickly catching up. What this means is that the hungry are all around us. So as followers of Jesus, what are we supposed to do?

The answer simply is to help to feed them, because this is what God does. Whether it is God sending Jacob's family to Egypt to avoid starvation. Or God feeding the people in the wilderness. Or Jesus feeding the 5,000. God's desire is for people to be fed. And this is the outcome of the story this morning from 1 Kings. Elijah tells the woman to have courage, and if she is willing to share then God will make sure that her meal and oil never run out, until after the drought is over. She shares, God provides and none of them starve. And I want to pause for a moment to be sure that we don't miss one of the most important aspects of this story, and that is that the widow is a foreigner. She is not a worshipper of the God of Israel. She is a worshipper of another god, and yet our God feeds her and her son. It is these kinds of stories that form the basis for Jesus statement about feeding the least of these. For when the righteous ask the Son of Man, "When did I ever feed you?" the answer comes back that you fed me when you fed the least of these. The challenge then is for us to find a way to serve the least of these by offering food. One way to do that is through our Shop and Drop Program.

(the following comes from an interview with Anne Barauskas who heads our Shop and Drop Program)

Shop and Drop is a program started by Elizabeth Gumbis about three years ago. The program is intended to assist food-insecure families at Alcott Elementary School in Pontiac with enough food to cover their weekend needs. We focus on weekends because the children can receive free breakfast and lunch at school during the school year, but there is often little or no food for the weekends. Those participating in Shop and Drop are asked to buy enough food for ten families, spending a total of \$100, or \$10 per family. The shoppers then either drop the food at Alcott on Thursdays or find someone to drop it for them. The Social Worker at the school, identifies families in need and then distributes the food accordingly. Shop and Droppers can then turn in their receipts and be reimbursed for their expenditure by the church. All one has to do is to bring the receipts to Jan or Martha at the church. In the 2018-2019 school year, this food made a difference in the lives of 104 children. We know that it matters to the families because the children are always excited to get the food and the parents are always appreciative. You can help by signing up to shop and drop, to shop or drop (partnering with someone else) or by making donations to help keep the program running.

My hope is that each of us will take the time to find out about Shop and Drop or another program that feeds those in need.