

Today we join thousands of congregations across our nation observing World Hunger Sunday. We do so in the midst of a world economic recession that threatens to gut relief programs at home and abroad. We do so as families at home are devastated by the loss of jobs and homes and in the face of an unemployment crisis that goes on and on and on. We do so as our own Congress gathers around our federal budget looking for places to cut and cut deeply. We do so as famine in the Horn of Africa, brought on by the worst drought to strike that region in 60 years, puts an estimated 12.4 million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti in desperate need of emergency food aid.

The famine in Africa is a story that has been drifting across our TV screens all summer, and yet it is a story that repeatedly has failed to catch our attention due to the prominence of the economic recession in our thoughts and concerns. The crisis has hit Somalia the hardest, due in part to the persistent poverty inherent in a situation where people go from day-to-day and year-to-year and generation-to-generation barely eking a living off their meager land and due in part to the seemingly endless civil war that torments that nation. Perhaps, like me, you have watched in horror and disgust as Somali fighters have blocked and pilfered international aid. Tens of thousands have had to flee their country, walking for weeks in search of food.

Bread for the World shares the story of Zamzam Farah, who made the difficult decision to leave her home in search of food and medical care for herself and her dangerously malnourished children. She carried her baby and 4-year-old twin boys for hundreds of kilometers, seeking to reach the Kenyan border for help. But one day, suffering from severe malnutrition herself, she simply could not continue carrying all three children. With no other adults to help her and unable to pay for transportation even if a bus or truck passed by, she had to leave her four-year-old twins behind in the desert. An estimated 29,000 Somali children younger than 5 have died in the last 90 days, and hundreds of thousands of children from Horn countries are acutely malnourished.

When we come to church on Sunday mornings, we may avert our eyes; or we may pray for the hungry; but frankly, we feel helpless before the immensity of such suffering. Some, faced with the devastation of such human tragedy, merely give up hope. Some give up faith in a God of love. Others of us, on the order of the prison inmate faced with suffering beyond measure in Elie Wiesel's *Night Trilogy*, find ourselves asking deep within ourselves, "Where is God? Where is God in the face of such suffering?"

Where is God in the midst of hunger and suffering? The question is not new. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is a cry of anguish voiced by the psalmist and by Jesus himself. We should be sure, however, that Hebrew scripture and Jesus himself had no qualms about locating God in the midst of human suffering. The Gospels tell us up front that Jesus began his ministry announcing the reign of God. Matthew and Luke then gather something of a summation of Jesus' preaching into the Sermon on the Mount or, in Luke's case, the Sermon on the Plain. The first words out of Jesus' mouth: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you" (Lk. 6:2-22).

Far from unacquainted with human grief, far from blushing at its very existence, Jesus came announcing the rule of God directly in the face of human suffering. He came saying, "You want to know where God is? Look there. Look among those who are poor and hungry and reviled and degraded." Luke's Gospel in particular sounds a steady drumbeat. It begins with Mary whose Magnificat sings of a God who brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly, a God who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. It resounds in Jesus' recurring welcome to those pushed to the margins of society and in his repeated warnings against reliance on riches and prestige and his calls to build up treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

Contrary to a theology that assesses human value in terms of dollars, Jesus announces a new reality that is grounded in the very nature of God. It is a reality that has already begun. It is a reality that is stated in the present—"blessed are you," "blessed are you," blessed are you." It employs a future hope—"great is your reward in heaven"—but it is a reality that translates and transforms the present. It is not a pie-in-the-sky hope. Unlike the blessings in Deuteronomy (11:26-28), Jesus' blessing is not contingent upon human behavior. Placed at the beginning of both the Sermon on the Plain and the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounces the beatitudes before giving a single command. Rather than saying "you ought", Jesus says "you are blessed." If his blessings were meant only for the deserving, they would be placed, Fred Craddock suggests, at the end of the sermon and preceded by the words, "if you have done all these things, you are blessed" (*Christian Century*, Jan. 24, 1990, p. 74).

"God," liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says, "has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's *agapeic love* [in *Voices from the Margin* (Orbis, 1991)

We should model our values, our priorities, our mission in light of who God is. In his book *When Religion*

Becomes Evil, Charles Kimball speaks of the numerous instances in which persons of other faiths often pose the question “Are you Christian?” Rather than formulating the question in the way more familiar to us, “Are you a Christian?” they ask the question in a way that jars him into self reflection. “Do I,” he finds himself asking, “reflect in who I am and all that I do the Christ I proclaim to serve?”

We would do well to ask ourselves such a self-searching question. More than a question about the religious category we associate with ourselves, it is a question about the very ground upon which we build our lives. In Christian ethics classes, we often talk about two fundamental questions that determine how we live: “Who is my God?” And in light of our answer to the first question, “How then ought I to live?”

The grace God extends to the poor, God’s presence with the poor is the same grace God extends to each of us. The Sermon on the Plain, our ethics, if you will, is grounded in the God we have encountered in Christ. For us, as for the poor, God’s grace begins with who God is, not what we do to earn God’s favor. It is not about our answering all of the matters of doctrine just right. It is not about our measuring up to pet legalistic codes of behavior that frequently omit huge portions of our faith and in particular those portions of our faith that address the needs of the poor. It is about our beginning with who God is and determining who we should be in light of the one we encounter there.

“Be merciful,” Jesus says, “just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). Do not busy yourself with judging others. Do not condemn others. Forgive as God forgives you. Give, and it will be given to you. And in keeping with the abundant mercy of God, what you receive will be overwhelming in its abundance. (6:37-38).

It’s more than a little unsettling. Given our Western individualism, we are used to tackling it all on our own. “We’re used,” David Lose suggests, “to paying for our mistakes, paving our own way, toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don’t”. This God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing at the places and among the people where we least expect God to be—“with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious” [workingpreacher.com]. Such associations didn’t mesh well in the first century nor are they in sink with the cultural expectations of our day. Dare we to emulate such a God?

A couple of weeks ago I attended an American Association of University Women with Norma Woy. As we walked into our dinner meeting with tables spread full of homemade dishes, someone met us at the door with the words, “We have a homeless man eating dinner with us tonight.” As the meal progressed, he joined us at the serving table and cheerfully filled his plate with food. As the meal ended and we began the evening’s program, he remained at the table, laughing as we laughed during the evening’s festivities and watching the pictures flashing on the screen during the speakers’ presentation on Bosnia. The ease with which the man was welcomed spoke volumes, I thought, about the group gathered and about the church in which we met. Having heard Jo Ann Garrett speak of the homeless who sleep in the gardens at the Unitarian Church, I strongly suspected that this was not the first time he had been at table there.

As I think about Grace Covenant Church, I have been moved by the grace with which we have responded during these eight years to people in need. I have been particularly struck by the friendship we have formed with the members of the LUAPA congregation that meets in our building. In a climate where Hispanic people are suspect in the eyes of so many in our society, I am grateful that we have met in our Hispanic neighbors the love of God in Christ; and I am convinced that in doing so, we are living out the reality revealed in Christ. God has no barriers, no preferences, no discrimination against people on the basis of nationality, race, socioeconomic status, gender or sexual orientation.

In Christ, we are not called to live down to society’s prejudices. We are not called to wander our world in blinders against the suffering and inequities that encounter us on every hand. In Christ, we are called to go with God into the world in mercy and compassion.

“What would it mean,” Sarah Dylan Breuer asks, “if we honored those whom God honors? What would happen if we stopped playing all of our culture’s games for status and power and privilege? What would it cost us if we lived more deeply into justice, and mercy, and humility? And more importantly, what blessings await us on that journey? It’s quite an adventure. Thanks be to God!” [SarahLaughed.net, Epiphany 4, 2005.]

How about you? How about me? Are we up for the journey? What better, more life fulfilling choice could we have?