

A Future with Hope

sermon digest

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Matthew 25:31-40

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Sometimes the news is just so right, so timely and so very much a repudiation of everything in the world that is wrong. That is the way I felt Thursday morning when every newscast—not once, not twice, but over and over and over—celebrated the news that Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan had been selected for the Nobel Peace Prize. We all remember Malala, pulled off a bus and shot in the head two years ago for championing her right and the right of other girls and all children in her country to go to school. We've watched with amazement and listened with shock as she has become an international figure speaking with such maturity on behalf of the right of girls and children around the world to an education and a life of well being and safety. Not yet seventeen, she is the youngest recipient of the peace prize ever.

That Malala shares the prize with Kailash Satyarthi, who at the age of 60 has spent a lifetime seeking to protect children in India and around the world from exploitative child labor and trafficking, is just icing on the cake. Satyarthi's Rugmark label, certifying that no child has been involved in the weaving of Oriental wool rugs, and his outspoken opposition to the merciless enslavement of children in that industry has impacted child labor practices worldwide. United Nations' General Secretary Ban Ki-moon's observation that this year's award honored children around the world was right on as was the Nobel Committee's own observation about the significance of the award's being shared by a Hindu and a Muslim, an Indian and a Pakistani, joined in a common struggle on behalf of education and against extremism. "In a way," National Public Radio's Scott Simon observed yesterday morning, it was as if India's Gandhi "also won 2014's Nobel Peace Prize." Although Gandhi's efforts to end his country's cruel caste system, promote the education of children and bridge the divide between Hindus and Muslims, India and Pakistan, had made him an international symbol of peace, he never received the prize, probably because of the enemies his campaigns for justice had created. How fitting that his efforts toward peace and justice were honored in the embrace of these two.

How fitting, too, that the honors were granted in such close proximity to the International Day of the Girl as well as International Food Day, World Habitat Day and World Hunger Sunday. Today we celebrate the courage and persistence of all who labor on behalf of fairness and the wellbeing of all of God's children. Today we remember the suffering that overshadows the lives of so many and rededicate ourselves to the task of working on behalf of a future with hope.

According to the United Nations World Food Program, there are 842 million undernourished people in the world today, which means that one in eight people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life. Hunger and malnutrition are the number one risk to health worldwide — greater than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

Hunger has risen dramatically in our own country, reaching 48 million in 1912—a 57 percent increase since the late 1990's. Programs created to meet the need like food pantries and soup kitchens have multiplied, too. In 1980 a few hundred emergency food programs dotted the country; today there are 50,000. "This," Janet Poppendieck, sociologist at City University of New York, insists, "is not your grandmother's hunger." Unlike the hundreds of thousands hungry during the Great Depression due to lack of jobs, increasingly those who are hungry today are hungry because of declining wages. Contrary to our stereotypes, more than half of hungry households in the U.S. are white, and two-thirds of those with children have at least one working adult—typically holding down a full-time job. ["The New Face of Hunger," *National Geographic*, August 2014, p. 67ff].

Admittedly, many of those who are hungry are also overweight, masking the problem for the unperceptive observer. "How," we ask ourselves, "could someone who is so obviously overweight be hungry?" In reality, hunger and obesity are actually two sides of the same coin. Families short on funds to buy food are forced to make a trade-off, often having to choose food that is filling and affordable over food that is nutritious and more expensive. Consider, for example, the fact that since the early 1980's the cost of fruits and vegetables has increased by 24 percent while the cost of nonalcoholic beverages, primarily sodas, has dropped by 27 percent. "The problem can't be fixed by merely telling people to eat their fruits and vegetables, because at heart this is a problem about wages" that have not kept up with the rising cost of nourishing food [Raj Patel, *National Geographic*, 84].

Bread for the World, and numerous other aid and public policy organizations are calling upon us as U.S.

citizens to financially give to help alleviate hunger—yes—but also to be good stewards of our citizenship. Beginning in the midst of the recent recession, they issued a call to people of faith to form a Circle of Protection around the neediest in our world to assure that desperately needed help is not eliminated or cut from our national, state and local budgets but protected and extended. The U.S. Food for Peace program coupled with our international Food for Education and child nutrition programs is the difference between hope and despair for millions of desperately at-risk people in our world. At home, our National School Lunch Program extended now by the school breakfast program, the summer meals program and more recently, the provision of evening meals for at-risk children in our communities could not be more critical. Cynicism that these children and their families are not deserving and despair in the face of the need are not options. Lives are being saved and invested with hope and meaning. Although our own Table of Grace and our support of local ministries in our community may seem small compared to the need, the level of gratitude we have encountered, the expression of appreciation for the dignity we have sought to honor in our dinner guests say otherwise. The cup of cold water we offer in Jesus' name speaks not just of who we are, but who the God is that we serve. Acts of mercy and justice expended within our church walls and through our stewardship as citizens concerned for the wellbeing of our neighbor are an expression of faithfulness to the God of mercy and grace we encounter throughout Hebrew and Christian scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ.

“With what shall I come before the Lord?” the prophet Micah asks.

Shall I come with burnt offerings, with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . .The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? [Micah 6:6-8]

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father,” Jesus will later say to his followers.

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. [Matthew 25:34-36]

Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and imprisoned—optional? No, not if you would be servant to the God of Israel and Jesus.

In all of the world there is no more tragic loss than seeing the light of hope go out of the eyes of any of God's children. In all of the world there is no more meaningful endeavor than expending our lives to give our children and other people's children a future with hope. How can we not exert every ounce of our being in service to that hope? Call me a dreamer, if you will; but I choose to live by and for the dream.