



**Food for Life Campaign
Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance
Sermon Competition 2010-2011
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This reflection was originally shared at St. Stephen's United Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada August 29, 2010

Jeremiah 2: 4-13

Luke 14: 7-14

Prayer: Loving Creator, it is fantastic that you love us. Help us feel that love; help us open our hearts to your word and presence today so that we might share that love. Amen.

God, the Great Inviter

Dinner parties. Often they are a delight to host and to attend and some remain in our minds forever. I have a 95 year old friend who likes to host a dinner party every week – and she has been doing this for years. She invites an assortment of people from varying parts of her life, puts us all at table together, serves us a delicious meal and then watches the conversation roll and jump from issue to issue.

Dinner parties are often centered around conviviality and feasting. Usually we get together with like minded people, or with people at the same stage of life as us and we share in a comfortable communion of similarities. We eat a series of delicious and lovingly made courses. We feast on the taste of the food and the love of the company.

Both scripture passages today touch on the notion of God as Welcomer. In Jeremiah God leads the people of Israel safely out of Egypt and welcomes them into a new land. In Luke, God, through Jesus, welcomes everyone to the table.

However, in Jeremiah, God discovers that after they have been led safely into a new and fertile land, and after they have been provided for during difficult times in the wilderness, the people abandon God for the god and ways of their new land. And, in Luke, God discovers that coming together at table to be nourished by God only leads to vying for status and only hosting people who can return the favour one day.

Both scripture passages made me think of something hymn writer, John Bell, said in a recent Celtic Spirituality seminar. He said developed countries were buying up hectares of land in Africa to grow crops – not to share but to import back to their own country. This was news to me, but I was reminded again of this when I read an article by Stephanie Findlay in the August 23rd 2010 edition of Maclean's magazine. So I decided further research was in order. As I read more and more about the leasing and selling of land in developing countries to developed

countries for private agricultural growth, the images of God as the living water in Jeremiah, and of God inviting us all to the table in Luke kept surfacing in my mind.

The message from the scriptures is that God desires to welcome us – even at our most faithless; and in turn, God encourages us to welcome others.

You might remember the global food crisis in the news in 2008 – the prices of rice and wheat and other cereal grains skyrocketed. This event accelerated an initiative that had already begun to pick up speed in 2004 – the leasing and/or selling of thousands of hectares of land in places like Ethiopia, Madagascar, Ghana and the Sudan to countries like Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Japan, China and India for the outsourcing of food. As part of the Agri-business, Western Hedge funds are involved, investing billions, all the while banking on future food scarcity. More than 125 million acres (about the size of Sweden) have already been leased, sold or are in negotiation.¹

Journalist Mark Schenkel quotes Jacques Diouf of the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization who calls leasing African farmland to feed rich countries neo-colonial.² Since 2006 this enterprise has made some people approximately 20-30 billion dollars.

In every decision we make, there are positives and negatives. And, the same is true in this case. On the one hand people say this new development in agricultural economics provides new technology, seeds and investment in Africa, investment that Africa has been trying for decades to attract. On the other hand people say massive land grabs push farmers from their own land and remove their access to water and other necessities. Economically only the governments who sign the deals benefit; and many countries involved lack efficient property and environmental laws to negotiate fairly.

Another journalist, Paul Vallely, refers to the International Food Policy Research Institute when he says the key to these negotiations is that they be mutually beneficial. That rural infrastructure should be developed with roads and grain storage, schools and health centres. That taxes should be paid to the governments for their own development and food distribution. That there be a binding code of conduct, responsible investment, transparency, legal consequences, contract farming and environmental assessments.³

Reports state that these new land sales are not just about food, they are also about bio fuel and about water. According to Paul Vallely, water is the key issue – if you get the land you get the water underneath it too.

I didn't know this, but the average person in the world today uses between 3000 and 6000 litres of water a day. Only one tenth of that is used for hygiene and manufacturing. The other nine tenths are for farming ... bio fuels using about 9100 litres of water to grow enough soya for only one litre of biodiesel.⁴

In her article for Maclean's Stephanie Findlay paints a bleak picture; and I quote "Already commercial farms dot the northbound highway to Addis Ababa. In the evenings, a steady stream of trucks loaded with fat, sumptuous berries and cherry-red tomatoes rumble past, rushing to Bole International airport and Gulf state grocery stores beyond. The highway's dusty shoulders, meanwhile, are littered with the carcasses of animals dead from starvation and disease, the bones bleached white from the sun. The contrast is grim, even by local standards."⁵ In Africa, where one in three people are malnourished it takes less than 24 hours for the fresh produce to go from

these rows of manufactured, cool and humidity controlled greenhouses (thanks to the latest in Dutch agricultural technology) to a few Middle Eastern cities.

At the end of the Jeremiah passage it says “be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

The symbolism of water can be easily lost on us here in Canada where we are surrounded on three sides by water and we have an abundance of lakes and rivers throughout our country. But for those living in arid regions where water is at an absolute premium, God as the living water, as the fountain of living water is an absolutely beautiful, refreshing and hope-filled image. But, as soon as the people of Israel were safe from harm and established in their new land, they felt they didn't need God and God's fountain of living water, they figured they could build their own cisterns in which to catch the water, and that they could provide for themselves.

I might be wrong in doing so, but I can't help but make the parallel between the Jeremiah passage, and us today – this story of land grabbing – working away to secure a future for our own food and our own water needs. Aside from the fact that it is most likely at the expense of someone else, it is at the expense of our faith in God. What does *God will provide* mean, when we choose to take matters into our own hands and get what we want for fear of scarcity in the future, and at the expense of others right now? We keep building our own cistern instead of drawing from the fountain of living water that is a life lived with God – only to find over and over again that what we build by ourselves is broken and does not satisfy.

The parable in Luke is just that – a parable, which means don't take it at face value. If we did we'd picture Pharisees and lawyers running to the best seats at the table. Then when they are told the lowest seat is the best seat because that's how to be exalted, we'd picture all the Pharisees and lawyers running for the worst seat at the table. A farce if ever there was one. But by telling us that Jesus is offering a parable, Luke indicates that we are to watch for inversions and twists in meaning.

What this passage in Luke tells us is that God is the host. We are the guests who will never be able to repay the invitation. God invites us to the table when we have no way of repaying the favour. How incredible is that? Not because of our good deeds, not because of our worth, not because of our dedication to church do we get a place at the table; but because in spite of our mistakes, in spite of our selfishness, our arrogance, our ignorance ... in spite of all this, God loves us and God wants us to share in the feast God has prepared. This kind of grace is overwhelming. It is enough to bring tears to our eyes and make us fall to our knees – that we are loved so much that we will be offered an invitation to the feast. This is incredible.

And, when we are gifted with such grace, what are we to do?

We are to open our lives and open our hearts to others at the table – to all whom God loves. It will mean sacrifice – not having fresh tomatoes and fat berries in the middle of winter in order that everyone may eat; it will mean anxiety – looking in the face of economic greed and saying no to our own comforts for someone else's rights; it will mean discomfort – breaking through the translucent walls of the bubble we've constructed to keep our own life free from the reflection of

reality; it will mean embarrassment – admitting the error of our ways; turning our hearts back to God; and seeing ourselves as one part of the whole.

When I was reflecting on the Luke passage in particular a question kept coming into my mind – why isn't every place at the table a place of honour? What if we truly saw each other as equals, what if we honoured each other and humbled ourselves in front of each other more often? We would be working on a deeper relationship with God. When we are at table – when we move in this world – we are amid creations of God – that in itself is a great honour.

They say real honour doesn't come from self-seeking but from it being bestowed on us by others. As we move into this week, what is one thing we can do to honour someone else – an individual or an entire nation? How will we bestow honour on others in order to come one step closer to making every place at the table a place of honour?

Amen.

Footnotes

1. Maclean's – Stephanie Findlay
2. www.nrhandelsblad.com – Mark Schenkel
3. <http://sanhati.com/articles/1734/> - Paul Vallely
4. <http://sanhati.com/articles/1734/> - Paul Vallely

The world needs to begin to think more urgently about water. The average person in the world uses between 3,000 and 6,000 litres a day. Barely a tenth of that is used for hygiene or manufacturing. The rest is used in farming. And the world's lifestyle, with factors such as increased meat-eating, is exacerbating the problem. Meat requires 10 times more water per calorie than plants. Biofuels are one of the most thirsty products on the planet; it takes up to 9,100 litres of water to grow the soya for one litre of biodiesel, and up to 4,000 litres for the corn to be transformed into bioethanol. "Under present conditions, and with the way water is being managed," the Nestlé chief says, "we will run out of water long before we run out of fuel".

5. Maclean's – Stephanie Findlay

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February 2011

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