



**Food for Life Campaign
Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance
Sermon Competition 2010-2011
www.e-alliance.ch**

Faithful Food

Texts: Ruth 2:1-13, John 6:1-15

Let me take you into a painting today. A painting entitled “Soup and Pie”. In the foreground of this painting is a boy, around age 12, clad in a winter toque and a plaid shirt, carefully balancing his tray containing a bowl of chicken noodle soup, and a coffee cup full of juice. Slightly behind him are pies on a table, as far as the eye can see: lemon, coconut, pumpkin, chocolate, apple, cherry, blueberry, and my favourite, the ever elusive key lime pie with a mountain of meringue on top. To the left of the pies are people lined up for their bowls of hamburger soup, soma borscht, or clam chowder. All of this appears in the foreground of the painting, but let me take you now into the background. Behind the pies, behind the soups, behind the people huddled in and around their soups is a man already marching up the stairs on his way to deliver soup and pie to shut-ins, to hospital patients, and to residents of the local care home. Let me widen the lens even more, and you’ll find at the bottom of the stairs a man collecting donations for this event, all of which are going to support Christmas food hampers for the aboriginal reserve neighbouring us. Our faith community’s annual soup and pie event was the source of a painting created for the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights’ art exhibit on “Just Food”. The committee hoped to explore the right to food through inviting six artists from Canada, and twelve artists from other countries to share their stories about food. Each of the pieces in the exhibit, including our own, had us explore the question; is food ever just food? When or how does it become something more?

Now let me take you into another scene. In the foreground is a rabbi, a teacher who is gaining widespread fame for his miraculous healings. He’s tired, exhausted really, and he and his followers walk to the other side of a sea, climbing a mountain to rest, to pause, and to meet the Divine in a solitary spot. As he looks up, a crowd moving as one body ascends up the mountain just on his heels. He looks at the crowd, turns to his disciple Philip and questions, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Now, let’s widen the lens here. In the background of this scene is a boy harbouring five barley loaves and two fish. Perhaps he was planning his own little picnic by the sea when he was caught up with the crowd chasing after this holy man? Or maybe he was on his way home with his catch for the day? Regardless, his loaves are the food of the poor. Since barley was the grain used for animals in his day, this little boy’s loaves are the food of those who could not afford refined flour. And he has with him his catch of two simple sardine-like fish, caught in the Sea of Galilee. These fish, often pickled, were not the food of kings. And it is this little boy, hiding in the background who turns just simple food into food that has creative and redemptive power.

This story is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels. It so captured the imagination of the Gospel writers that each included it. Food is the source of our very existence. Without it, we starve and our planet is fraught with conflict and death. With it, we thrive and create avenues of health for our planet. The Gospel authors knew that food is never just food. This is a story played out in each of the Gospels that embarks us on a journey to exploring what generosity, compassion, and stewardship of our resources can do to change our lives. Food is for body and for spirit. It has the ability to multiply and to transform us. Every painting, every scene, every experience we have of food is also a story about something else.

Food is of such value that the first question Jesus asks the burgeoning crowd around him is not one about why they are there, or what they want, or what they want taught, but he concerns himself with how he will feed everyone gathered. This query connects with his resurrection command to “feed my lambs”, and to the question “do you love me?” If you do, then “feed my sheep.” Food is never just food. It has the power to multiply from filling a stomach to filling a soul. It will transform a hoarding spirit into a generous one. It can change a hungry community, as it did around the Sea of Galilee, into one that is satiated in generosity, kindness, and justice making.

Several years ago, our faith community had an intergenerational service packed with drama, the Word, and the sacrament of Holy Communion. All people were invited up to the front to tear off a piece of bread and dip it into the chalice full of juice. One little girl appeared, around age 6, she was on her own. Looking around at what everyone else had done, she came forward, and simply dunked her fingers into the chalice, and walked off. We offered her a piece of bread, but she said, “no thanks, this is all I need.” She then went back to her pew, sucking the juice off of her fingers. People were shocked. Where were her parents? How could she ignore part of the sacrament? Was it not sacrilegious to suck the juice rather than delicately sip it, or to have it bleed into the bread and consume of both together?

The Canadian prairie poet Lorna Crozier has written a poem entitled, “Time to Praise”, in it she says:

I must learn again
to praise, to bless this land
we come from, flesh or clay, this mother-
earth where our own mothers dwell.
I must learn to care for it
as a mother her child, a fox
her pups in the hidden den,
a man his broken body.
I must learn to place
my ear to the soil,
hear what the land is saying
in its several tongues
for its songs are the oldest songs
songs of seeds and harvests,

gain and loss,
the stones with their sad lament
for the sweet lost singers
of the grass and the air.
This is the place
to begin. Looking to the earth
for our answers, not the sky.
Listening to the long
drawn-out vowels of the land
(for they are there,
I tell you) as it speaks
across the blue distance
we call time, across our own
brief histories of the heart.(Crozier 51-52)

Crozier is wandering through her prairie land, and discovers that it is the land that has more to teach us about our earthy heart filled histories, than the sky's wonder and awe. For the little girl in my worship service, juice sufficed. She didn't need the bread. She passed it to someone else. For the little boy by the Sea of Galilee, he didn't need all of his loaves and fishes. He passed them to Jesus, who passed them to others, who passed on what they didn't need. It is a valuable lesson for us in North American society to leave some of what we can harvest for others, to look at the land and to understand what the land is teaching us in terms of our faithful stewardship. That which remains can be given to others. We clearly don't need to hoard. We can give, and in giving generously, we will find we have multiplied our food into something more.

Israelite law in the book of Deuteronomy commanded that part of the harvest remain in the field so that the foreigner, the orphan, or the widow could glean what was leftover. It is this practice that leads Ruth into her momentous encounter with Boaz. She, in turn, is able to feed her mother in law, both with leftover grains, and with a new home, and a genealogy that leads straight to Jesus Christ. The land is both teacher and actor.

What would the world look like if we chose to let others glean from our enormous resources? Every year, 15 million children die of hunger. The World Health Organization reports that 1/3 of us on God's planet are well fed, 1/3 of us are underfed, and 1/3 of us are starving. If the 1/3 of us that are well fed chose to follow the example of the young boy in the Gospel reading today, we could feed the majority that surrounds us.

Our Lenten practice of giving things up exists to help us with this understanding. We give things up to prove that they don't own us, but that we own them. If I can't give up a penchant for expensive dark chocolate, then the chocolate owns me, and I don't own it. If we, as the wealthy recipients of the 1/3 status in this world, choose to hoard all that is given to us, we ignore the Biblical laws of gleaning.

In my region, one farmer I know spends the last moments of his wheat harvest always lifting up that last sheaf of grain to give thanks to God. He stops his combine, he gets on his knees, and he raises that sheaf heavenward. He said that to him he needs that moment to remind himself that

while he may think he is feeding the world, it is in fact the Creator of all who has given us everything we need. Like Jesus before he distributes what he has, this farmer offers his thanks to the One who has given him the ability to harvest.

As the “Just Food” exhibit continues to travel across Canada, and possibly other parts of the world, artists from Iraq, Chile, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, the Ukraine, and southern Manitoba cause us to reflect on how food speaks to people of faith. Behind every scene, behind every portrait is a story that poignantly calls us to action. Food has power. It has power to transform stomachs and brains, muscles and hearts, values and visions.

Is Jesus ever just talking about food? I believe he is always speaking about food that is justice. For Jesus, food is far more than a noun. It is, in essence, a verb. Food is never just a part of our physical sustenance. It is a part of a story that calls us to act as grateful recipients of God’s bounty. Food without a backdrop of faith is like justice without mercy. Every story of food has a back story. If we care to look closely enough, we can see a man sharing food with shut-ins, a little boy offering up his entire meal to a hungry crowd, a young woman sharing her life with her mother in law, a little girl understanding the difference between fullness and overabundance, and a farmer recognizing in gratitude to whom he owes his livelihood and his ministry. Do we want a face full of food, or a faith full of food? The choice is ours. May God grant us the wisdom to know the difference.

*Crozier, Lorna. “Time to Praise”. Alternative Futures for Prairie Agricultural Communities. Ed. Jerome Martin. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1991. 37-52.

Rev. Dr. Lesley Fox, United Church of Canada minister, living in rural southern Manitoba