

“The World Food Crisis”

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
July 20, 2008

*From the east comes the sun,
bringing a new and unspoiled day.
It has already circled the earth
and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples.¹*

In many lands, the sun rises on fertile fields and abundant rivers,
plants and animals and people with food in abundance.

In others, the sun rises on dry soils, cracked earth,
places where food is scarce and stomachs go hungry.

This is nothing new.

There is nothing new under the sun, as the scripture reminds us.

Hunger is not a new problem for us as people on this earth.

It has been with us for a very long time.

Yet right now it is very bad indeed.

Eight hundred sixty-two million people—
nearly one billion people around the world—
are suffering from hunger.

Things are especially difficult in sub-Saharan Africa,
Latin America and the Caribbean,

South Asia, and some of the former Soviet republics.²

In some countries more than half the people are hungry every day.

A lot of them are children.

For those of us who have never known hunger like this,
it's hard to imagine.

Maybe we can't imagine.

But sometimes the stories in the news

¹ Clinton Lee Scott, “Morning” (*Singing the Living Tradition* #438).

² World Food Programme, “World Hunger” map, available online at
http://www.wfp.org/Country_Brief/Hunger_Map/index.asp?section=9&sub_section=hunger.

are enough to break your heart open.
This is the one that got me.

Dateline March 6, 2008, Cap-Haitien, Haiti

While millions of Haitians go hungry,
containers full of food are stacking up in the nation's ports
because of government red tape —
leaving tons of beans, rice and other staples
to rot under a sweltering sun or be devoured by vermin.

A government attempt to clean up a corrupt port system
that has helped make Haiti a major conduit
for Colombian cocaine
has added new layers of bureaucracy —
and led to [severe] backlogs....

The problems are depriving desperate people of donated food.
Some are so poor they are forced to eat cookies
made of dirt, salt and vegetable oil to satisfy their hunger.³

People so hungry they are eating *dirt!*
And food to feed them sitting in the ports and *rotting!*
I can hardly find the words to say what this is.
To call it an outrage is so inadequate.
People so hungry they are eating dirt,
just to have something in their stomachs,
and food flowing in from other countries,
right there, available,
and it just sits there until it is so rotten, it's not even food any more.

I had to know more about what was going on.
I read as much as I could find.
I wanted to understand: Why was the food just sitting there?
As I read more, it made sense in a tragic sort of way.

³ Jonathan M. Katz and Jennifer Kay, "Tons of Food Aid Rotting in Haiti Ports," Associated Press, March 6, 2008.

Customs at the Haitian ports used to be pretty much a joke.
You could ship whatever you wanted
without worrying about inspections.
So the producers of cocaine in Colombia were shipping
huge quantities of cocaine into the U.S. by way of Haiti.
Just recently, the Haitian government set up a new system
of very strict inspections of all cargo that came into their ports.
But the inspectors were new at their jobs.
Everything had to be done by hand—no computers, no photocopiers.
And so the backlogs started to get worse and worse.
Days and weeks and months to get clearance for cargo
to come in or go out.
Cutting down on drug-smuggling is not a bad goal,
but in this case it had the unintended consequence
of almost totally blocking the delivery of emergency food relief
to Haitians who were desperately hungry.
Giant cases of beans, stuck in the port, rotting away in the sun.

The more important question, of course, is:
why are people in Haiti suffering so much from hunger?
It's a complicated story,
but we can start to get a handle on this one too.
I'm a great believer in *information*
when we're trying to figure out what to do.

All around the world,
ever since the formal system of colonization ended,
countries like the U.S. have encouraged developing countries
to accept loans for development.
That sounded very nice and helpful,
but the problem was paying them back.
When the loans came due and the countries couldn't pay,
the World Bank pretty much forced them to raise money
by growing and selling crops for export.
Again this might not sound like a bad thing—

growing food to feed people in other countries—
but in many cases,
the export crops displaced the traditional crops
that actually fed people in their *own* countries.
So this crazy system evolved where developing countries
were growing tons of food but selling it all to other countries
to make enough money to pay back the loans they'd taken out—
even when their own people were going hungry!

And then what happens is,
the U.S. and European countries rush in with food aid,
which again isn't such a bad thing in itself—
people need to eat.

But food aid ends up making the long-term problem much worse.
When the market in a developing country
is flooded with cheap or free food aid,
the farmers who are actually growing food in that country
can't compete. No one's going to buy their pricy food.
So they can't make a living farming any more;
they migrate to the cities, where often there is not enough work,
and now *they* become hungry people too.
It can be even worse when food aid
takes the form of food that people in a country don't traditionally eat.
In Haiti, 30 years ago our country started flooding the market
with U.S.-grown rice.
(Not the rice we grow in the Central Valley, by the way.
That mostly goes to Asian countries where hunger rates are very low.)
The U.S. rice was super-cheap, so Haitian people started eating it
instead of the crops that actually grow in Haiti,
like corn and sweet potatoes.
U.S.-grown rice became *the* staple crop in Haiti,
the thing everybody eats nearly every day.
Local farmers went out of business left and right.

And then the prices started to go up.
We've seen it here too—grocery prices are going up all over the world.
Part of the problem is ethanol and other biofuels.
Government promotion of biofuels
has pushed the demand for corn and sugar through the roof,
and the prices have gone up right along with the demand.
Global climate change is starting to mess with harvests,
so production is down, which again brings prices up.⁴
And, of course, higher gas prices are hurting everybody too.
Transportation is so much more expensive,
and that also gets passed on as higher food prices.

In the last year, the price of rice in Haiti has doubled.
A ten-pound bag of rice now costs four dollars.
It will probably go up to seven dollars in the next few months.
And most people live on less than two dollars a day.⁵
So that's why they are starting to eat dirt.
Actually, as I learned more,
I found out this is marginally less horrible than it sounds.
The dirt folks are eating is a special kind of dirt
from the central part of the country.
It has a high calcium content,
and it's traditional for pregnant women to mix it with salt and oil
and eat it as an antacid and for the calcium.
But it's not supposed to be the only thing you have to eat.
It's as if we had nothing to eat but TUMS.
They taste OK,
but you wouldn't want to have to make a meal out of them!

So, in a nutshell, you have people eating TUMS
because they can't afford anything else to eat,
because the system of post-colonial loans and imported food
has decimated the local agriculture,

⁴ "U.N. Warns of Worldwide Hunger Epidemic," *Record* June 4, 2008.

⁵ Carol J. Williams, "Roots of Haiti's Food Crisis Run Deep," *Los Angeles Times* May 13, 2008.

and global warming is making everything worse—
and *even then* this is an entirely fixable problem.
The U.N. estimates that the international community
could end hunger around the world for 30 billion dollars a year.
As a comparison, our government plans to spend 162 billion dollars
on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan next year.
30 billion dollars a year is chump change.

So here come more questions:

What's the problem?

Why aren't we doing it?

Why is this not a no-brainer?

It's tempting to retreat into a cynical place,

to say it'll never happen,

to just say the world is full of greedy jerks and that's that.

But our message, the heart of the faith *we* share,
is that the world is full of people who have not yet learned
to love one another as sisters and brothers—
people who have not learned to trust one another—
people who have not learned
that there is really and truly enough for everyone
if we trust each other enough to share openly and unreservedly.
We will sink or swim together,
and we would rather *swim!*
That is our saving message to the world.
And surely that's where our power lies too.

You know, last week our guest preacher Linda Laskowski
suggested it's not a good idea to focus too much
on things we are concerned about but can't change.
Seeing other people suffer
and caring about them

and not being able to make a positive difference,
is incredibly demoralizing.

It saps our power.

Today the big question for *us* is,
is this world hunger crisis one of those things
that we care about but can't change?
Or *is* there anything we can do?

In the reading from Mark's Gospel,
you remember hunger is stressing out the disciples too.
They've been working with their teacher
to take care of other people, teaching them, treating sick people.
It's a good problem—they are reaching so many people—
but they haven't had a minute to themselves.
When they get hungry, they've been grabbing a granola bar
or a banana, or maybe McDonald's because it's quick.
They feel overwhelmed. They really need a day off.
So when Jesus says, "Let's take a break and kick back a while, just us,"
it is *so* welcome.
Just like everybody, the disciples need to rest and refresh themselves.
It is really hard to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders—
feeling the burden of people's needs.

So they go somewhere else;
they hop in a boat and head off for a camping trip.
Jesus knows a nice little beach nearby where they can pitch a few tents.
But what happens is, the local people see where they're headed.
They tell all their friends and take a shortcut to the beach,
so when the disciples get there,
the beach is mobbed with yet more needy people,
thousands of people in fact.
Jesus is fine with the change of plan.
His heart is so open and he is so grounded in himself,
he has plenty of energy to teach these people too.
But I imagine the disciples feeling pretty grumpy.

They think, “What about *our* face-time with Jesus?
What about our vacation?”

So when the sun starts going down,
they ask Jesus to tell the people to take off
so they can go buy some food from the local shops.
It’s interesting—
we don’t hear anything about the people Jesus is teaching;
they don’t seem to be worried about dinner.
But the disciples are feeling up-tight.
So Jesus tells them, OK, it’s dinner-time;
would you please give them something to eat?

And, boy, they are ticked off!
They say to him, what, do you want *us* to go to the store
and spend 200 denarii to buy dinner for all these people?
Now, one denarius was worth about one day’s pay
for an average person.
So, today, one denarius might be worth, say, 75 dollars.
Two hundred times that is fifteen thousand dollars.
So the disciples were saying to Jesus,
are you telling us to go spend fifteen thousand bucks on dinner
for all these random people we don’t even know?

And now the story is starting to sound familiar.
The disciples don’t think
they could possibly afford to feed all these hungry people.
Some of us feel pretty overwhelmed and pessimistic too.
But what the disciples missed,
and we might miss it too,
was that Jesus didn’t ask them to feed everybody all by themselves.
He asked them simply, “Give them something to eat.”
Something.
He didn’t ask for more than that.

And as it turns out, the *something* they had was plenty.
You know the story.
Jesus takes the five loaves of bread and two fish
and blesses them,
and the disciples give them out to all the people.
And miraculously there is enough food for everybody,
plenty for everyone to eat and still have leftovers.

Now I know that many of us have little patience for miracle stories.
But imagine if this were a scene in a dream. What could it mean?
I see Jesus in this story,
and he is so deeply connected to the source of life—
energy and power and compassion just well up in him;
where the disciples are frustrated and ruffled,
he is fresh and rested and wise.
And yet the disciples have something to offer too.
They are the ones who finally offer up their food,
and they are afraid it won't be enough,
but somehow it is plenty;
it grows and multiplies as things do in dreams
and all is well and everyone is fed.
This story, this magical story, invites us to discover
that when we are deeply connected to that source of life,
we too will flourish
and our gifts will spill over to nourish everyone around us.
Our thoughts and actions will be both compassionate and effective.
And when we offer what we have,
trusting that others will join in to help us,
there will truly be enough.

This church cannot feed a billion hungry people on our own.
But we offer what we have,
trusting that we are not alone,
joining with millions of others all around the world
so that no man or woman or child on this earth will have to go hungry.

In our own community,
when someone comes to our door hungry,
we give them a grocery card
and a bus pass so they can get down to St. Mary's for a meal.
Collaboration is so important!
We have been giving to the Emergency Food Bank for a long time now
so that our neighbors will have food on their tables.
We have a bin in the Fireside Room next door
that is just waiting for your contributions.
Next time you go to the grocery store,
think about picking up some peanut butter
or a can or two of beans to donate.

As we look farther away, it *is* harder.
Our church can't feed all the hungry people in Haiti on our own,
or anywhere else in the world,
but we don't *have* to do it all on our own.
For a couple of years now, led by our youth,
we've been building a relationship with the Heifer Project.
Heifer gives farm animals to poor people around the world,
teaches them how to take care of them,
and asks them to share the wealth
by passing on their animals' offspring to neighbors in need.
I have personally given money to the Heifer Project for years,
and I'm sure many of you have also.
Later in the year Heifer will be the recipient
of one of our monthly social justice collections,
and I encourage you to give generously then too.
Again, it is so important to make connections
and collaborate with other people.
We don't have to do it all by ourselves.

You know, the other day someone in this church reminded me
that there's another way to look at the story of Jesus and the disciples
feeding all those people.

It might just be that this is not a miracle story at all,
at least in the usual sense.
Could it be that all those people on the beach,
all those thousands of people who had come to hear Jesus,
had actually brought along a little food for the road?
Maybe one little girl brought an apple.
Maybe her dad brought a sandwich,
maybe their cousin brought some rice,
and their neighbor a few tomatoes fresh from the garden.
Maybe what Jesus said and did touched them so much
that when the disciples came around with their little loaves and fishes,
they started pulling their snacks out of their pockets
and adding them to the common baskets,
first one person, then another, and another,
until the baskets overflowed with food
and everyone finally and truly realized
that when we share with each other
there is more than enough to feed us all.

May this be so in our time.
And may we play our part in speeding that day.

Amen.