

There Shall Be No More Poor Among You

**Address by Jim Cornelius
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“There shall be no more poor among you”.

These are the words that God speaks in the giving of the law as recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy (Chapter 15:3-4)

“There shall be no more poor among you . . . if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.” Then God goes on to say “if there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land . . . you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but shall freely open your hand to him.”

The nation of Israel was to be built on laws that were to weave together both charity and justice. As the community of Israel was being formed, laws were established that set out parameters to address hunger, poverty, inequality and exclusion.

The law of gleaning said that “when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, you shall leave them for the poor, and for the sojourner; I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

God claimed a tenth of all farm products which his people produced. This tithe was designed not only for the Levites who ministered in the temple, but was also for “the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow”. (Deuteronomy 14:29)

The law went further saying that “if you lend money to any of my people who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him”. (Exodus 22:25) These were loans taken out to keep bread on the table and obtain other basic necessities. They were not commercial loans. They were to be treated differently.

During the year of the Sabbath (every seventh year) no land owner had the right to harvest or possess what grew in his field and orchards during this 12 month period. Whatever grew the Lord claimed, so that the “poor of your people may eat”. (Exodus 23:10-11) Even more remarkable, during this Sabbath Year, all charitable debts had to be cancelled. Poor people who had to borrow just to survive, were freed from this burden after six years. The poor were not to fall into permanent servitude as had happened during the Egyptian famine.

When the land of Canaan was divided, every family was given a share of the land for a permanent possession. On occasion, some were forced to sell the land due to a bad series of crops or other misfortunes. The Law of Jubilee said that in the 49th year, property should be returned to the original family. This law was intended to ensure that alienation from the land would not be permanent.

This was to be a society under the reign of God that, no matter what social and economic disruptions they faced, would not push people permanently to the margins of society, no one would be permanently excluded. Even if some households had to divest themselves of assets to survive, their position would be restored.

This is in direct contrast to the experience of the people of Israel in Egypt and the way in which the food bank developed and managed by Joseph was used. The story of Joseph and the food bank he established in Egypt is a familiar story to many of us, often told in Sunday school and in picture books. We usually remember it as a good story, a great family drama with Joseph as the hero who saves his family and the Egyptian people from a great famine. There is a very dark side to the story by which the food bank is used by Pharaoh with the help of Joseph to strip people of their assets and land, and further consolidate Pharaoh's power. At the end of the process, while people had survived, all the land had come under the control of the Pharaoh. The food crisis had been used by the powerful to further consolidate power.

We often see the same processes at work today. Food crises provide opportunities for elites to enrich themselves. Engage in systematic asset-stripping of the poor, and consolidate political and economic power. The Joseph story provides a realistic portrayal of the economics and politics of famine which still resonates today. Neither charity nor justice was at work.

The very different vision of society under the rule of God found in the law of Moses has shaped the imagination and vision of the prophets of Israel, Jesus and the church.

After his tempting in the wilderness, Jesus launched his public ministry and began teaching in the synagogues. Luke records in Chapter 4:16-21 the return of Jesus to Nazareth when he stands up and reads from the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming the favourable year of the Lord, when the downtrodden are set free, the blind recover their sight, and captives are released. This favourable year of the Lord is likely an allusion to the year of Jubilee, when captives are set free, debt is forgiven, and land is restored. Jesus is announcing a kingdom that operates on a very different basis than the Roman Empire or Pharaoh's rule in Egypt.

Any reading of the scriptures makes it clear that in the Kingdom of God being preached by the prophets and inaugurated in the person of Jesus, we all have been given responsibility to ensure that those in need, those who are hungry, are cared for and have food. This responsibility is assigned to both readers and individuals.

Furthermore, the gravity of ignoring the hungry, the poor, the dispossessed, is repeatedly emphasized in the biblical texts. It is not just something that would be good to do, if you are able, if you have time, if you have some spare funds. It is a requirement, an obligation. In the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), Jesus provides an account of the final judgment where people are divided on the basis of whether they had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and welcomed the stranger.

The vision of society under the rule of God where there shall be no poor among us, where the hungry shall be fed, shaped the establishment of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

The early Mennonite visionaries were troubled by the hunger they saw around the world, and by how national and global systems were operating in ways that were not addressing the urgent needs of "the least of these". They imagined a food bank that would model a different way of working. It would be a bank that would enable Canadian farmers to share some of their harvest with people in need around the

world. It would be a bank that would serve as a church witness to the broader community about this vision of the world without hunger, about the reign of God where “there shall be no more poor among you”.

The MCC Food Bank was started by the Mennonites in the mid-1970s. The early visionaries imagined that it might one day involve other churches. In 1982, the Mennonite Central Committee called other denominational bodies to a meeting in Winnipeg to see if there was interest in establishing an inter-church food bank. When interest was expressed, a process was quickly launched which resulted in the establishment of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank in 1983. The Presbyterian Church in Canada through Presbyterian World Service and Development joined nine years later in 1992. The Foodgrains Bank is now a partnership of 15 Canadian churches and church-based agencies representing over 30 Christian denominations.

So what do we do, and how do we operate today?

Every year people in rural Canada come together to raise funds for the Foodgrains Bank through over 200 community growing projects.

Through these projects, they plant, tend, harvest and sell a crop, and then donate the proceeds of the sale to the Foodgrains Bank. Some are small projects and others are hundreds of acres.

Individual farmers also support the Foodgrains Bank, donating a portion of the sale of their crop at local elevators.

Many congregations are also involved. They raise money through things like concerts, offerings, community meals, children’s activities and special appeals. They also initiate and support growing projects. Urban congregations sometimes develop a partnership with a community growing project, helping to pay for the inputs needed to put a crop in the ground, or the costs of renting some land.

Our work is also made possible by donations from thousands of individual Canadians across the country – people who want to be part of the effort to end global hunger.

We also receive \$25 million in annual matching support from the Canadian government. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is the primary Canadian partner of the Government of Canada in the distribution of food. We are a trusted partner.

Each member has an account in our bank into which donations can be deposited for the members’ use. The donations and government funding are used to fund programs implemented by our member churches and agencies and their partners around the world.

We use these funds to provide food for people caught in emergencies due to drought, conflict or natural disasters. We help people in the developing world grow more and better food, and earn income to purchase the food they need. And we fund nutrition programs, particularly for mothers and young children who are often the most adversely affected by a lack of good quality food and poor nutrition.

In addition to these international programs, the Foodgrains Bank works to influence improvements in Canadian government and international policies that will help people who don’t have enough to eat, and works to involve and engage Canadians in the mission of ending hunger.

Last year, the member churches and agencies of the Foodgrains Bank were able to stand with and support 1.3 million people in 42 countries. Presbyterian World Service and Development has been an important part of this collective work of the Canadian and worldwide church. PWS&D has been responding to the crisis in Syria, supporting relief and recovery efforts to flooding in Pakistan, working with mothers to improve nutrition in Malawi and Nicaragua, and supporting many efforts to improve and strengthen livelihoods in Afghanistan, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Malawi and Tanzania.

What does all this mean for the people we seek to serve? A few quick stories.

I was recently visiting Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We are supporting a large feeding program for displaced people inside Syria and refugees who have fled to Lebanon and Jordan. I remember a long conversation with Amoun Habouch, who was living with her children in a small crowded apartment in one of the slums of Beirut. She spoke of her home having been bombed back in Syria and being forced to flee. She was now struggling to keep a roof over her family and find enough food. As we were talking she said, "I have a headache every day worrying about how I will pay my rent." Every bit of money she could get was going to rent, leaving almost nothing for food. You could see the relief in her eyes now that she was getting a monthly food voucher to buy food she needed through a Baptist program we were supporting.

When recently travelling across Niger in West Africa following an extended drought, I remember sitting under a tree speaking with Yapoa Lale, a young mother. She was living in a village that had faced a complete crop failure. During our conversation she said "hunger is the greatest sickness", and then pointed to her body and said "my body was not meant to look like this." As she pushed her nursing child away, she said "there is no milk in these breasts." Fortunately, our food relief delivered through a Catholic agency arrived in her village not long afterwards.

Down the road I remember meeting another woman, Ramatou Hassan, a widow. A second round of food rations were being distributed that day through a program supported by the Foodgrains Bank and the Christian Missionary Alliance. She spoke about how before the food relief began to be distributed, she had very little food. She could tell her children were becoming malnourished because her children did not have enough energy to play. After the first month's food distribution, their health was recovering. She pointed to her children who were playing under a tree, remarking on the energy they now had.

Just as importantly, when her food supply had begun to run out, she was beginning to have to sell her land to get food for her family. With the arrival of the food relief, she was able to keep her land so that when the rains returned she would be able to plant a crop and feed her family. This meant that she would not fall into permanent destitution.

On another trip to Ethiopia, I met Mohamed Amin in the small village of Billa. He had been a young man during the Ethiopian famine 30 years ago, and had been living in one of the hard-hit areas. Food relief had helped save his life. In the immediate aftermath of the famine, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank had supported the Lutherans to construct a water diversion and irrigation scheme in the community. Some 30 years later, the scheme was still operating, there was a water committee that oversaw the management of the scheme, and the irrigated area was lush and green. After touring the water scheme, Mohamed said "this system is our life".

As I speak with people like Amoun, Yapo, Ramatou and Mohamed, I have no doubt about the value and significance of the work that we do together as a Canadian church. Yet I am well aware that our modest resources pale in comparison to the needs of the world. How can we speak of working to end global hunger?

The early visionaries who persuaded the Mennonite Central Committee to establish a food bank were well aware that this food bank they were proposing would never have the resources to end world hunger. Nevertheless, they believed that the church could model a way of working in the world that did not accept hunger as inevitable, that would embody a proclamation that God does not intend for any to go hungry. One of the images of the Kingdom of God is of a banquet table to which all are invited. By taking practical action to feed those who are hungry, to support efforts that improve nutrition and restore and strengthen livelihoods, the church becomes a community of promise for the wider world. It also earns the credibility to call for a social order that ensures everyone has enough to eat, to call on governments and others to take up their responsibility.

I find the work of the great Anglican missiologist, Lesslie Newbigen, instructive in this regard. The mission of the church is not just to be an 'agent' or 'instrument' of the in-breaking reign of God, it is also to be a 'sign' and a 'foretaste'. The church does not exist merely to accomplish something on behalf of God, it also exists to embody the future to which God is calling all humanity, it exists to proclaim and point to this future. The fact that all the Canadian churches are working together to end hunger and are supporting church partners around the world in this effort is a powerful testimony to this vision.

Michael Barnett, in his recent book *Empire of Humanity*, a history of humanitarianism, concludes that "religious agencies can take credit for pouring the foundations for humanitarianism. Religious discourses continue to motivate, shape, and define various dimensions of humanitarianism." This is the church, through its action, pointing to a different way of being in the world, it is the church helping shape societal values and global institutions.

When the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, issues the Zero Hunger Challenge calling for action to eradicate hunger, I see the Spirit of God at work, the Spirit sent as part of God's redeeming work for the whole of humanity and creation. I believe one of the tasks of the church is to continue to help inform, shape, and sustain these global actions.

We understand how important it is to situate our understanding of our mission of ending hunger as not really "our" mission but as part of "God's" mission, as part of the redemptive activity of God. We as a partnership of Christian churches and church-based agencies have been invited to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, to proclaim and participate in the in-breaking of God's kingdom, a kingdom where the "hungry are filled with good things" as Mary sang in the Magnificat. We pray that God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven", in "giving us our daily bread".

Jesus calls us to participate in his redemptive and healing work, to be a sign, a foretaste, and an agent of the in-breaking reign of God where hunger is no more.

I want to thank the Presbyterian Church in Canada for partnering with the broader Canadian church through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank in this mission of ending hunger. And I invite each of you to join with us in this God-inspired work.