

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
SABBATH, LAND & ENOUGH

Texts on Sunday, August 5, 2012

*Deuteronomy 24: 14-22; Luke 4: 1-4*

TODAY WE CONTINUE a series of sermons on great matters of American culture and practice in which millions of people are stuck in painful or unjust relations, and no movement toward solution is coming through our collective will. Our theme today is the food system in America. It seems hardly to bear repeating, but let it be heard again that this, the world's richest nation, has the largest proportion of poor people, when compared with other industrialized nations. How is that possible, except that somehow our wings are broken.

Unlike gun control or our criminal justice system, which no politician will discuss, hunger and poverty have sometimes mattered to elected leaders. Yesterday, I heard President Lyndon Johnson's voice on the radio, coming from 1964. He was declaring "war on poverty" in that famous Texas drawl. Yet how tragic was the news that followed. For the first time since 1964, the proportion of Americans living at or below the poverty line will exceed 16%. One out of six of us is poor; that is, has less than \$23,000 for a household of four. The news story went on to report that although malnutrition is not the scourge in America that it had been before President Johnson started the Food Stamp program and other anti-poverty initiatives, unlike the poor in Johnson's day, today's poor are generally employed—and hungry! Two full time jobs paid at the federal minimum wage barely raise a family above water.

From the main food Bank in Washington, D.C. this year, a record 33 million pounds of food will be given to 700,000 people at risk of going hungry. In four decades of work with food pantries, the manager of that facility has "never seen anything as bad as now." She calls it a hunger crisis "growing into the middle class." And while the largest expenditure of the 2012 Farm Bill is for food stamps, you know this is lipstick on the pig, for the second largest expenditure, more than 30 billion dollars, subsidizes corn, wheat, soybeans, and cotton on very, very large farms. 70% of those subsidies go to the biggest tenth of all farms, with these results: two American companies control 75% of global trade in grain; four American companies slaughter 80% of beef; 90% of chickens are raised on contract with big companies like Perdue. Monsanto and four other companies control three-quarters of all vegetable seed in the world. Might there be a relationship between this massive consolidation of agribusiness and levels of poverty and hunger not known for two generations?

Let me tell you a little story. The first car I ever owned was not strong. I had a small income and a small family to care for, and when I would notice a small problem—a little odd movement in the gear box, a little mystery fluid on the ground—I would not act. With national car health insurance, I am sure I would have taken it to the doctor, but I didn't. Before long, some very complicated breakdown would put the car in the shop for a day or two. And the mechanic would tell me that such-and-such a defect—whose symptoms I well knew—had been developing for a while, and this caused that, which resulted in these . . . And I would see that by paying no attention to the small thing, I myself had aggravated the conditions that

caused the big thing, and an awful expense. I would slap my forehead, saying, "It's a system, man!"— meaning, *Remember! Everything is connected to everything. Ignore the least thing at your peril.*

Of course, this warning applies to all systems. Mechanical systems are infinitely simple compared with biological systems or human systems. There, when the signal of a difficulty seems small—you know, a shift in the way your family member acts at the breakfast table—the breakdown it is ultimately linked to so consumes all that you really care about that you would pay your life savings to have the wrongs righted. But then it's too late. In this sermon series, all the matters we are considering have this system nature. Whether the issue is immigration or warfare or medicine or crime and punishment—*Oh, America, it's a system! Everything is connected to everything. Ignore the least at your peril.* The urgency of the issue is whether enough people will see the system and their part in it and the symptoms of its failure—in time.

Now, to actually see a system in a new way, and to see how we ourselves are part of it and responsible for it, is a spiritual matter. With the word "spiritual," I refer to a process of becoming aware of the presence of higher and lower powers and values, and coming alive to our freedom to choose between them, as well as to some of the impulses and fears that limit our freedom. A young adult who sees that his money fears are part of a network of decisions that have led to his car's complete breakdown is starting in on a process of self-understanding which will become explicitly spiritual. The proof of this spiritual development can be seen in its alternative. Suppose the same young adult in a jam might just gets miserable about money. Then he drinks or hits someone or gives up on his dreams. As we have often said here, in the face of loss, the alternatives available to humans are starkly simple: it is either misery or spiritual growth. This is true not only for individuals, but for organizations and for nations, too. America is poised between misery and spiritual growth. We at The Riverside Church are committed to bring alive the spiritual meaning of citizenship in a nation grown too often dull and sleepy and miserable.

According to the great legend, when Jesus had eaten nothing at all for forty days and was famished, the devil came to him, tempting him to command a stone to become a loaf of bread. Jesus' response—his refusal, in a word—shows that he knows he is part of a system. Think of it. Suppose the power to turn stone and dust into food were to come to a human, or to a multinational organization. The consequences of having power to make food for nearly nothing would not devolve on the magic man alone, for if one stone can become bread, why not all stones? Then, the natural relationship of the creature to the creation would be broken. The natural state of humankind, which is to hunger after more than substances, would twist away from the earth and our dependence on it, and away from heaven, and our dependence on God, and would land on the magic man, or men, with the special powers. All the lands would be his, or theirs, then all the laws and the armies. It would be a food system, with one free man—or one free consortium of multinational organizations—enslaved to their need for power. To this, Jesus said No. *Man and woman does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.*

In a book called *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben brings facts to bear that prove

something which has slipped from our national memory of growing food: Large farms produce less food per acre than do small farms. If you really wanted to increase food production from available land, whether measured by weight or food value, you would not have large farms, but small ones. Small is beautiful. The reason large farming and processed foods have kicked small farms and real food out of the way is that small farms require people where large farms require oil. Since World War I, McKibben writes, "it has been cheaper to use oil than to use people" to grow food.

Reading that, I could hardly contain my wonder for the ancient story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The evangelist could never have guessed how deep he was probing when he had the Devil say, "Command these stones to become breads." The Latin for "stone" is *petros*, as in *petrify* and *petroleum*. *Petroleum* literally means stone-oil. In our day, American agribusiness has commanded these stones to become bread. The food business depends on oil to fertilize soil, fuel machinery, fumigate crops with fungicides and pesticides, and fly and drive food to far cities. Why, we are no longer really even buying food in supermarkets. Cheap though our food supply is—proportionate to income, we spend less than half what households spent on food before World II—still, only one-sixth of our food dollar finds its way to farmers. The rest goes to petroleum and packaging, to middlemen and Madvertising. Command these stones to become bread? Yes we will! we have said to the magic man.

Why does our culture support this land-wasting system and these labor-losing, farm-banishing bargains with the devil? To make money and to save money and to save time, always driving the price down and down, so we can have "more."

Our belief in "always more" has become our national myth. Hoping, and even demanding, that there come both political and an economic solutions to our wants and our neediness and to our injustices, we expect technologies—or, more vaguely, progress—to help us guard every gain we have made so we have not to give up our vaunted "American way of life"—and still somehow distribute yet "more" to help the poor. Apart from the often abstract notion that we will have to leave this place one day with nothing in hand, we as a people have lost any memory of saying *No!* to the magic man. *No. It is enough. A human does not live by bread alone.*

Yet there deep, deep in our tradition stands the teaching. *When you forget a sheaf in the field, do not go back to get it; it is for the poor. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip them; what's left is for the poor. When you gather your grapes, do not glean the vines. Leave what is on them for the poor. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. Do you hear the word deep within? Do not take all you can. Do not maximize profit. Keep a Sabbath, not only once in the week, but in the land: Shut down your stores. Leave off work. Let your laborers go home. Do not strip the land of every value it can produce. As for oil—ah, they never heard of oil of old! You can yourself write what they'd have said to us, if they knew what we would find! Do not drain the chalice of the earth. It's a system, O man, O woman. Learn to leave it beneath the holy ground, so that that ground may serve you forever. Do not turn all these stones to bread.*

To live into Sabbath, which is the spirit of grace and the spirit of enough, we need not just to see the system, but to practice it. This is essential to spiritual life—to

experiment with our time and our attention, applied in freedom and consciousness to test our deeper strengths against our ordinary habits. Some years ago, Vice President Cheney dismissed all changes in habits to help the environment taken at the individual and household level as merely “personal virtues” with no impact on the world’s needs. It is easy to feel after his point of view, how insignificant seems, say, the purchase of organically grown bananas or even a hybrid vehicle. Nevertheless, the Vice President misunderstands the deeper function of changed practice. Only at the level of our daily practice is it possible for our consciousness to grow as a people, to turn us from misery toward possibility. Changes in daily practice are exactly how great change comes to a nation, if change comes at all in time.

Just in the last few days, while preparing for this sermon, I have realized that I myself need to change my food practices. Last spring, I had considered buying a weekly share of real food through the Corbin Hill “community supported agriculture” (CSA) cooperative—but it seemed to me then that I had not the time to prepare what the farmers would bring. Now, I am seeing myself inside the food system in a new way. I have changed my mind. I must take part in the real food system, to deepen my connection with my Creator, with my society, with myself and with the land.

Let me leave you with a word from Wendell Berry on this subject.

Once one’s farm in one’s thoughts have been sufficiently mechanized, focus on production [what this morning we have been calling “more”] becomes merely logical . . . After mechanization, it is certainly possible for a farmer to maintain a proper creaturely and stewardly awareness of the lives in her keeping. However . . . [it] requires a distinct effort of will . . . The cultural resources that can inform and sustain such an effort of will [are] gathered under the heading of *husbandry*. . . Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conserving way to our places in the world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living networks that sustain us. (*The Way of Ignorance*, p. 96-97)

Friends, in a little while, we will come to the communion table. You will have a tiny bread, and a small sip from the cup of blessing as a sign of the Life you are given. May these be for you a remembrance that you have enough, indeed, that you live not by bread alone, but that God provides.

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*The Riverside Church  
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