#  Reflections: Jesus' mandate to feed the hungry

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The time has come for Christians to face the truth. Over thirty thousand of our brothers and sisters die of hunger every twenty-four hours. And with every death, the weight of guilt upon the church grows heavier.

In The Way of the Wolf, Martin Bell phrased it succinctly. He wrote, "It is terrifying to see a starving child. It is more terrifying to be a starving child. Starvation is horrible. To be without food is hell."

When we refuse to act, when we decide not to alleviate the torment of the hungry, we sentence them to hell. But, let's understand. We pronounce the same sentence on ourselves.

We have to stop kidding ourselves. Every single hungry person on this planet is an indictment against our fat and prosperous church. Every malnourished child calls our spiritual bluff.

"He who withholds but a pennyworth of worldly goods from his neighbor, knowing him to be in need of it, is a robber in the sight of God...further, I declare, who spares a penny for himself to put it by against a rainy day, thinking, I may have need of that for tomorrow, is a murderer before God."

The above statement is just as true today as it was when originally penned in the late thirteenth century by the German mystic, Meister Echart.

Our idleness and lack of action in the face of millions of starving children is a stark reflection of the emptiness of our spirituality. Our hope is as hollow as our faithfulness if we dare think that a loving God would deign to bless us who sentence our brothers and sisters to the excruciating torture of hunger. To believe otherwise utter absurdity.

Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." It is a simple command. It can be obeyed. Or, it can be ignored. But it cannot be misunderstood. Spoken on a crowed hillside near Bethsaida nearly 2,000 years ago, these words of Jesus place a divine mandate on all Christians to provide food for the hungry.

For people of faith there is only one correct response to the cries of the hungry. That response is action. Anything else is immoral, irrelevant, and totally unacceptable.

Action on behalf of our hungry sisters and brothers is where faithfulness and righteous merge into justice. And justice demands that we share our resources with the poor and hungry.

Whom do we think we are fooling? Mothers holding listless, malnourished infants are not interested in our plastic platitudes. Fathers struggling to scrape out shallow graves to bury their emaciated sons do not give a tinker's damn about our theology. The parents

of the starving want only one thing: food for their children. And still the words of Jesus come down to us. "You give them something to eat."
Gandi, although not a Christian, perfectly understood the perfect response. In his own words, "Christ dare not come to the hungry except as bread." When will we in the church learn this basic truth?

How Many are Hungry?

The numbers are staggering. United Nations studies show that over 786 million people face "chronic malnutrition" in developing regions of the world. This extremely conservative estimate doesn't include the hungry in the developed world, or those who are hungry in the 72 countries with populations of less than 1,000,000.

World Bank figures provide an even more frightening perspective on the numbers of hungry. In their estimates, over one billion people were under the poverty line of $1.00 a day in 1989. Poverty is a root cause of hunger. These World Bank figures paint a horrifying picture of hunger in our world.

It is difficult to imagine anyone in the United States in need of food, but the vulgar reality is we have thirty million citizens who go hungry in our own country on a regular basis. These are people who have nothing to eat two or more days every month.

Again the question must be raised: How can such obscenity exist in the midst of the richest, most affluent nation in the history of our planet? Am I missing something? Where are the people of faith? Where are the disciples of Jesus Christ?

There is good news, however. No one needs to die from hunger. No more children must die from malnourishment and malnutrition. The good news is that is more than enough food to feed all the human family is already being grown.

That's right. Enough food is available to feed all the world's hungry and starving. That's the good news. But, for our hungry brothers and sisters to be saved from starvation, for those in such desperate need to be fed, these God-given resources must be equitable distributed.

Christians Must Act

Thirty thousand of our brothers and sisters are dying from hunger and hunger related diseases every day, even when the food necessary for their survival is available. What is required is simple justice. This is where faithfulness and righteousness have to come together on behalf of the hungry. We who call ourselves Christians must begin to act. It is time to implement a system of just distribution of food and other necessary resources.

We in the church bear full responsibility for ensuring a justand equitable distribution of the world's resources, especially food. There is no one else responsible, regardless of what may be said. Every other organization in the world exists for its own good. The church was called into existence to serve. Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." That makes us accountable.

The exciting part is that we have the God-given opportunity to become leaders in a great revolution. If we will but take seriously our mandate to feed the hungry the church could again become a lightning rod for the power of the Holy Spirit.

With the physical and fiscal resources at the church's command, we can begin to create a world where hungry is only a memory. All it takes is the will to begin. As the German philosopher, Goethe, wrote, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

The key is action. We must begin to act, and act now, on behalf of the hungry. We only have to look around us to see the drained, hollow faces of the poor and starving. Every one of those faces is an invitation to faithfulness. Every one of those faces provides new incentive for us to merge faithfulness and righteousness into real justice, a justice that insures all of God's children their rightful place at the table.

Forget the idea that before we can act we must pray and study and meditate to discern the correct and most proper course of action. All that is required is that we feed the hungry. Pray, study, and meditation can wait until our hungry brothers and sisters are seated at the table along side us.

Just do it! That is all that faithfulness requires. When this happens, we will become part of a glorious explosion of spiritual power. We will see a world where hunger is only a distant memory. This is the world envisioned by the Spanish poet Lorca when he wrote:

"The day hunger is eradicated from the earth, there will be the greatest spiritual explosion the world has ever known. Humanity cannot imagine the joy that will burst into the world on the day of that great revolution."

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