

Today's scripture has a story that's pretty familiar to us. Nevertheless, I'm going to dig into it and hopefully give us some food for thought as we prepare to break bread this morning.

In first-century Palestine, under the rule of the Roman Empire, there was a lot of food insecurity. It's a term we use today. We also call it hunger, lack of nutrition, sometimes bordering right on starvation. People were hungry during that time, and they lacked a lot of nutritional needs.

If we see the Gospels as a whole, we see that Jesus was often healing a lot of people. One reason He was healing them is because they were sick because they didn't have enough food. They weren't getting enough nutrition. All of you nurses know that, and others who are taking care of your own health. It's pretty obvious. Lots of people were sick because they didn't have enough food. This was a concern of Jesus when He taught us to pray to God what we call the Lord's Prayer, which we use every Sunday. There's a phrase in there: "Give us this day our daily bread." It's because a lot of people didn't have enough food.

Now also, this is biblical tradition, that God is concerned about all the people. This comes through the Hebrew Scriptures from lots of different prophets besides Isaiah, also Ezekiel. Ezekiel condemns Israel's leaders for failing to feed the people, Ezekiel 34:1-10. Isaiah declares God's will that people "share your bread with the hungry," Isaiah 58. Not our passage this morning, but just a few verses on down the road.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus endorses this merciful act, really of almsgiving. In the Five Pillars of Islam, almsgiving is one of those things. A lot of Christians say, "What's almsgiving?" Well, it's sharing what you have, and that's what comes through in this story, is sharing what you have.

Also, if you read this text carefully, you'll see that there's some judgment upon the nations. If the nations are causing their people to be hungry, Jesus is saying that's an uppermost concern of ours, as well as feeding the people who are right here in front of us.

So, on this particular day, He goes to a deserted place. One reason He was going is because Rome's ally, Herod, was just an awful, terrible person. Jesus is feeling all that demonic power, and instead of striking straight back, Jesus decides—and I think there's wisdom here—to separate Himself from some of that demonic power. Just move away from it.

He gets in a boat and goes over to a deserted place, away from Herod, away from the powers that be. Not a bad thing to do. Moses did the same thing when he was facing Pharaoh. You can go back and look up all of that. Moses needed a break from that, so he separated himself for a while. It's not a bad thing for us to do sometimes when you're feeling overwhelmed by demonic forces. Some of you tell me that's exactly how you're feeling. Sometimes we need a break. Sometimes we need to come to church. Sometimes we need to sing the hymns and pray intensely. So, Jesus was doing that. He separated Himself.

Well, the people heard He was moving to this deserted area. So, they went over there by land. They didn't all jump in a boat, but they went by land. If you read the text, it seems like they got there before He did. I don't know. Maybe He was reflecting in the boat on His way over.

But when He got there, He got out of the boat, and there was the crowd. He had compassion on them. What's the first thing He started doing? He didn't feed them right away. He started healing them because He had compassion on them. How would He know? He just looks at them. They're all sitting there, standing there. Some of them probably hobbling around, not able to walk. Maybe some are blind. All kinds of diseases at the time. So Jesus got busy, and He was healing them because He was compassionate toward them in this deserted place.

Now, when it came late in the evening and they're in this place, the disciples started saying, "Hey, these folks are going to be—if they're not hungry already—they're really going to be hungry because there's no place to eat." So they go to Jesus. A very pragmatic sort of thing. We church people are very pragmatic. They go to Jesus and they say, "Hey, maybe we should dismiss these folks so they can go to some nearby villages and find enough food because we don't have anything."

"Well, what do you have?"

"Well, we have five loaves, two fish."

(And by the way, Karen Whiting didn't skip over anything in the reading because some of you are thinking, "Where's the little boy?" Right? The little boy had a basket, remember? That's in another Gospel. That's not in Matthew. We stick with one Gospel at a time. In Matthew's version, there's no little boy that Andrew goes and finds. But the disciples did come up with the five loaves—the barley loaves, another Gospel says—and the two fish.)

Jesus blesses them. We know the story. We love the story. They pass it out, and the folks are fed. When they're all done, they go around with some baskets and collect it up—twelve baskets full—and everybody had their fill.

It's one of the great miracles that appears in different Gospels. The importance of food.

One commentator from Luther Seminary, a professor, made a very, very cool observation, I thought. He looked at the language in one of the commentaries, and these words—taking, loaves, blessed, broke, ate—aren't they the same words we use in the sacrament of Communion from the Last Supper? Was this the Last Supper? No. There was no cup. It wasn't the Last Supper. But there's a similarity. There's certainly a parallel.

The truth is, Jesus used food, as God had used food with the other prophets, to say that God expects there to be justice among the people, which means food for everybody. And you can go down the list: housing, education, etc., etc. But we're talking about food right here, as well as water in the Isaiah passage. Justice for the people.

We have similar issues today. We're talking about the nations, and you know, we see all these things. Mission And Outreach Team meets tomorrow morning. We're collecting all these things [pointing to donations stacked in the Sanctuary], and I have a word to say about that in next week's sermon. We're helping a lot of folks.

The food stamps are being cut drastically. Something like 1.3 million kids will have no food stamps by the time we meet next week. Next week's sermon. You want to come back, all right? You want to come back. If I give

you all of it this morning, we won't have time. We won't be out of here. It's a communion meditation. It's not a full sermon.

But what I want to mention is an international issue, which we've mentioned here a few times before, and that is what has happened in Sudan. It's been lifted up here in prayers many times. This week Amnesty International, and most of us recognize it as a wonderful, wonderful group that's been around a long time, came out with a major report about what the Rapid Support Forces, the RSF, did around the city of El Fasher in North Darfur.

Darfur is one of the states in the country of Sudan in Africa. We've referred to this during prayer concerns here in this church over the past several months. Lots of ethnic cleansing.

I've not been to Sudan, but I've been to South Sudan, the newest country in the world, which is about ten years old now. They broke away from Sudan, and part of that was a justice issue around racial things. The people in South Sudan are Black. The people in what's left of Sudan now are Arabic. In Darfur, the violence, the ethnic cleansing, is the Arabs against the Blacks. I have lots of Arab friends, and I love the Middle East. But it's the Arabs against the Blacks. If you have Black skin, you're out. We'll put the link to the report in the e-news. But RSF crimes, according to Amnesty International, include "murder, forcible transfer, imprisonment, torture, rape, sexual slavery, enslavement, extermination, and persecution."

Hundreds of thousands of children have been displaced, many of them repeatedly risking death as they tried to escape these attacks. Countless, countless children have been orphaned. Food was used as a weapon, as has been done many times throughout history. They surrounded the city. It's under siege, and famine spreads. People have almost nothing to eat whatsoever, so they died from starvation, as that was used as a weapon of war.

It's hard for us to realize just how terrible and awful that is, even though we read the report. I haven't read it all. I read some of it yesterday.

But I think, once again—you know I love history—history helps us understand some of this.

In this case, there are no reporters there. In this case, we pretty much have a language barrier, do we not? Not many people speak English there. Even the refugees who get out of it all have to be translated, so we don't have a lot of facts about what happened.

But we can go back into our own history, which I want to do for just a couple of minutes, to the Battle of Vicksburg, one of the most important battles in the Civil War. Vicksburg was a fort right on the Mississippi River, and the Confederacy controlled the Mississippi. So, the Union said, "We need to get Vicksburg."

So, there was a siege, and no city was bombed more than Vicksburg except Atlanta. It was a siege that lasted forty-seven days, in late spring and early summer of 1863. We have a pretty good idea of what some of that pain was—the pain caused by hunger and by the siege—because there were people in Vicksburg, probably the most highly educated, literate city of the entire Confederacy. They had libraries and all kinds of things, doctors and professors. It was quite a city.

There were people there who wrote in their diaries. So, we have that perspective from the people in the city. We also have the perspective of young farmers who suddenly became soldiers because they were recruited from Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. And guess what? They wrote back home to Mom and Dad and their wives, writing about what they had seen and experienced. These are primary sources.

I'll just give you a little flavor. One Confederate soldier said, "There's been a suspension of civilization." Interesting. It was so bad—a suspension of civilization.

There were some romantic stories about people living in the caves. They dug a lot of caves into the hills around Vicksburg. But it wasn't very romantic. They were damp; they were dark; there were diseases. There wasn't very much food at all. On top of all that, malaria swept through. Rats were running everywhere. It was horrible.

When they finally surrendered after the siege, which was on July 4, 1863—the same day the Battle of Gettysburg finished, the two great Union victories—the soldiers came out, and they were ghastly. They were covered with mud and all kinds of filth, but they also hadn't eaten for a long time, as had the civilians. It was very shocking when the Union soldiers went in to see them.

A lot of the Union soldiers opened up their packs and took out hardtack and bacon, whatever they had. They shared it with the folks they had just been fighting.

So hunger, lack of food, was used as a weapon in the siege of Vicksburg, just as it was used in Sudan the other day, and just as it has been used in other places.

But God doesn't have much to say about that in a favorable way, because the message of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is that there should be enough food for everyone.

You heard the words from Isaiah: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." And then comes the question: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?"