



Feeding the Sheep

By John La Boone

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. – John 21:17

When I read scripture I like to look for metaphors and analogies, but sometimes I get the feeling that Jesus was speaking literally. Maybe feeding people with actual food was exactly what he had in mind. It must have been important because he said it three times in a row. So, let me tell you about Heifer International, one of the most efficient and amazing ways to get more food to more hungry people and to promote human dignity and self-reliance while doing it.

Heifer International was the brainchild of Dan West, a native of Ohio and a member of the Church of the Brethren denomination who dedicated his life to helping others. He was a conscientious objector in World War I and worked for the Emergency Peace Campaign. Later, during the Spanish Civil War (1936—39) he served as director of a relief organization that distributed food to refugees in war torn Spain. It was always difficult because the food available was not sufficient to meet the needs of the people.

Problems often have hidden opportunities for blessings if we look for them. The problem of not enough food gave West the idea that donating a cow would have vastly greater benefits than rationing out one little cup of milk per person. Back in America, he contacted farmers and churches and pitched the idea of donating a heifer to families in need. People responded and the program became a ministry of the Church of the Brethren. The ministry prospered and in 1953 became an independent non-profit organization.

Through donations and training, Heifer International strives to give people a way to not just alleviate their immediate hunger but to go from hunger and poverty to hope and prosperity. The organization helps link communities and bring sustainable agriculture and commerce to real people to help them end the cycle of desperation. Donated animals and other products provide people both with food for themselves and a reliable income, as agricultural products such as wool, milk, eggs and honey can be traded or sold at market. This amplifies the local economy and creates new opportunities for building schools, creating agricultural cooperatives and forming community savings to fund small businesses.

Families that receive donations are required to share the training they receive and the first female animal with another family. The program calls this "passing on the gift." This multiplies the benefits and it gets people to helping others in a common concern for all humanity.

Heifer International has a gift catalog that can be viewed online (or a free paper copy can be ordered over the phone) that explains the range of assistance options we can sponsor through donations. For instance, a trio of rabbits is \$60, or \$10 will pay for a share that will be completed by other donors. A pig, goat or sheep is \$120 or \$10 for a partial gift. A hive of honeybees is \$30. A flock of chickens, ducks or geese is \$20. You can even donate a water buffalo for \$250, or \$25 partial. There is also the

choice to direct your gift to be used however it is most needed. Recipients of the gifts are called “partners,” and they receive expert training on how to use their new resources in the most efficient ways. It’s the philosophy: Give a person a fish and they will eat for a day but teach them how to fish and they will never be hungry again.

There is a lot more to Heifer International than farm animals. Some of the gifts provide everything needed to build integrated farms. This means planting food for the family and fodder for the farm animals; keeping a sustainable operation by using the resources such as animal fertilizer and biogas stoves; and caring for the Earth by improving the soil and environment. You can even donate young trees to be used in reforestation to combat soil erosion. The organization strongly believes in good stewardship of the Earth.

Heifer International has a keen interest in women’s empowerment. If women farmers had access to the same resources as men, it is calculated that more than 150-million additional people would have enough food to eat. Your gift will provide support for women’s groups, training in gender equality and the means to send girls to school.

You can also donate to provide a community with clean, safe water for \$300. Millions of people around the world don’t have access to clean drinking water. In the impoverished communities where Heifer International is working, many of the homes lack running water, and some families do not even have a well nearby. Instead, they must spend hours each day fetching water from a distant source. This is often a chore left to the children — especially girls — leaving no time for school. This gift helps families install treadle pumps and teaches them about managing water resources and it improves community health by counseling people on proper sanitation. You can also give the gift of an irrigation pump for a farm for \$150.

Heifer International helps families to help themselves. For \$36 you can give the gift of better nutrition, which includes fruit and vegetable seeds to start a small farm, chickens to raise and training in sustainable farming practices and healthy nutrition, all of which provides protein, vitamins and better nourishment. Families that don’t have enough to eat often rely on emergency relief organizations if that is available, and the cycle of a tenuous, stress-filled existence continues from one generation to

the next. More than one-billion people worldwide live in extreme poverty and today malnutrition and hunger-related diseases claim more lives than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

You can even donate a biogas stove for a family and the training to use it for \$50. Twenty shares of \$50 would outfit everyone in an entire village with stoves. There is also an option for helping people build better housing for themselves.

When I was a member of St. John's Cathedral we had an "alternative marketplace" each year as Christmas approached. It gave us the chance to buy "Christmas gifts" for our friends and families that were actually donations to Heifer International. We got a card (which can also be downloaded online) to send to the person telling that a hive of bees or a sheep or a flock of ducklings was donated, in their honor, to a needy family somewhere in the world. It was the perfect alternative to buying one more material thing that was not needed for someone who already had everything. It also introduced Heifer International to others who may want to support the organization's mission.

Donating is a good way to honor others. When Jan and I got married and combined our two households we really did not need any wedding gifts so we asked people to refrain or to support a charity like Heifer International if they just had to give a gift. Many people told us they found that very satisfying. A friend of mine at the cathedral recently died and I made a donation to Heifer International in thanksgiving for her life and friendship. She was an amazingly kind and helpful person and I'm sure she is pleased in heaven about that.

At the cathedral we chose Heifer International rather than other organizations because of its stellar and unmatched record for effectiveness and good stewardship of donations. Seventy-five percent of all donated money goes directly for the products given to needy families. Only five percent of the donations is used for administrative costs. They have the infrastructure and organizational wherewithal to transport the donated products globally. Heifer International has operated in 125 countries all over the world (including the USA) and has helped 25-million people in the last 70 years. It continues to become more and more effective in its operations by continuous data collection and analysis, self-review and self-improvement.

I've just highlighted some of the facts about Heifer International, but there is much, much more to it. For more information visit www.heifer.org or call 855.9HUNGER (855-948-6437) for their free catalog. There are many ways to help feed Jesus' sheep and this is one I especially recommend to you. Every act of kindness makes the world better. Bless you.