

Feeding the Hungry

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 21:1-19

Delivered on May 5, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

It was a good question that Jesus asked Peter. Jesus addressed him by his given name, calling him not Peter but Simon, as he said “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” At the last supper, you may remember, Jesus said to Peter, “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter didn’t believe this, but after Jesus was arrested later that night, as Peter was standing outside the high priest’s courtyard, a girl came up to him and said “You are not one of his disciples, are you?” Having just witnessed Jesus’ arrest, Peter must have feared for his own safety and so naturally he lied and said “I am not.” Well, it was a cold night and so Peter then moved by a fire to warm himself and he found himself with a small band of strangers also trying to keep warm. One of them repeated the girl’s question, “You are not one of his disciples are you?” Again, “I am not.” Finally, one of the high priest’s servants said to Peter, “Didn’t I see you with him in the olive grove?” In other words, “Didn’t I see you with Jesus at the time of his arrest?” And a third time, “no”, and at that moment, at that very moment, the cock crowed, just as Jesus had said it would—just as Jesus said it would when Peter denied him three times.

Well now we fast forward, past the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday, and now the risen Christ approaches Peter and he says “Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Again, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? And yet again, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Three separate times, he asked Peter this, one time for each denial. Peter answered yes, each time, and so what did the Lord tell him to do? Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep. Don’t you find it remarkable that the act of feeding is so connected to Jesus’ ministry, it is so intertwined with everything he did in his

ministry that if we were to erase every passage from the gospels that talk about feeding hungry people we almost wouldn't have anything left. For we would have to cut out the whole story of the miracle of the loaves and fish. We would have to cut out the last Supper when Jesus broke bread and gave it to his disciples. We would have to cut out Matthew 25, when Jesus said I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, and we would of course have to cut out this story, where Jesus tells Peter that if he is truly sorry for what he has done, to go out and feed the hungry. I know people who are so fond of quoting Jesus when he said that man does not live by bread alone, and I am aware that Jesus said that, but the key word is alone, he never said man could live without bread, and all you have to do is keep one eye open when you read the gospels to figure out that for Jesus, bread was pretty darn important.

According to a website called ShareFaith.com, there are almost a half a million Christians in the Stark-Summit county area. By Christians, to be clear, I am not talking about people who have made a sincere, heartfelt confession of faith in Christ, I don't know how to go about counting such people, but by Christians I mean the number of people who have membership in some Christian church. According to statistics, I should also tell you that the median income in the Stark and Summit area is about \$47,000. Now, I realize that \$47,000 isn't exactly rich, but it is hardly starving. And I am telling you these things this morning for this reason. Let's suppose you had never been to this part of Ohio in your life and you knew nothing about it. If someone told you how many Christians lived in this area and what the median income was, and if you also read the gospels and knew how much Jesus talked about feeding the hungry or how many times he himself fed the hungry, you would only come away with one possible conclusion, right? You would say, certainly it must be the case that no one in this area is hungry, right? No

one. But think again, because not only is there hunger in our area, but one out of 7 people in Stark-Summit does not have enough food. One out of every 7 people in this area is malnourished, and it is even worse for children. When it comes to children, the number goes up to one in 5.

Now, every now and again, I hear people ask me, "Pastor, why is it that so many young people are so cynical about the Christian faith? Why is it that so many young people don't want to come to church? Is it that we're not making them feel welcome?" No, I don't think it's that we're not making them feel welcome. I think that welcoming people is important, but I don't think it is that we're not making them feel welcome. Nor do I think it is the case that young people by and large don't see Jesus as being important, although I hear that sometimes too. But given the gap, the mile wide gap between what Jesus said and how his followers live, I think what a lot of young people, and yes even some middle aged and older people want to know is what on earth does belonging to a church have to do with Jesus.

Sometimes you hear people say things like "God only helps those who help themselves." It is interesting to me that I have searched and searched and never found anything in the bible which says that God only helps those who help themselves. In fact, I actually see plenty of times when God helped people in the bible who could do absolutely nothing for themselves, like when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. I don't think there's a whole lot you can do to help yourself when you're dead. But even if there were something in the bible that said that, it is simply false that all those who are hungry in the Stark and Summit area are lazy people who have done nothing to help themselves. One in five people who are fed by our local food banks have at least one member of their family serving our country in the military. And a full eighty

percent, four out of five people have at least a high school diploma. There simply is no excuse, there is no excuse for ignoring a critical need in this area that the half a million Christians in our area should not only be meeting, but dare I say leading the charge to meet.

I am aware that we at Northminster cannot control what a half a million people do. We are just a drop in the bucket of that half a million. But we can control what we do. We can control whether we are going to take this little light of ours and let it shine or hide it under a bushel. Today, a group of us from Northminster will be joining other volunteers from around North Canton for this year's Hunger Walk. Last year the Hunger Walk raised more than eleven thousand dollars and had more than 1200 pounds of food donated. In the past five years the Hunger Walk has raised more than 63 thousand dollars and taken in more than 7000 pounds of food. Participating in the Hunger Walk is not all we do here at Northminster to address the problem of hunger. Just some of the other things we do include donating non-perishable food items to the local food pantry at Zion Lutheran church and we also volunteer at the monthly community dinner at Reedurban Presbyterian to serve hot meals for anyone who wants them.

I believe that through efforts like these to address the chronic problem of hunger in our community, slowly but surely, people would start to see that mile wide gap between what Jesus proclaimed and how his followers live start to close, and slowly but surely people would begin to understand that we in the church really are different, we really do have something incredibly attractive to offer when it comes to the question of how one should live. I believe that. But that is also not why we feed the hungry here at Northminster; we do it because it is the right thing to do. Jesus did not say feed the hungry and your churches will grow. He did not say feed the hungry and your membership rolls will increase. He did not say feed the hungry and more

people will believe in me. He said feed the hungry because whatever you do for the least of these, you do unto me.

I hope you will join us today at the Hunger Walk. We will be meeting here at 2:15 and we will make the short trip up to Community Christian Church on Main Street to register, and the 2.1 mile walk begins at 3pm. If you cannot join us, I hope you will give generously to the offering we are collecting today to support the Akron-Canton foodbank. And if you cannot do that, I hope you will pray for us today and I hope that you will contribute to our other efforts in this church to fight hunger when you are able to do so.

Feed my sheep. Take care of my sheep, Feed my lambs. These are our Lord's immortal words to Simon Peter who lived as our Lord's disciple two thousand years ago. Aren't they also the Lord's words to us as we seek to be his disciples two thousand years later?