

What About Hunger?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 5, 2023 – Communion Sunday

Text: James 2:14-17

What about hunger? This is our topic in this “Back to Basics” sermon series in these weeks following Christmas and leading up to Lent. I chose it for this Sunday precisely because this is a Communion Sunday, the time when we gather around the Table of Jesus Christ to celebrate his transformation of our lives as we share a holy meal together. Prayers for the hungry are part of this sacrament. Thus, our awareness of the hungry is inherently a sacramental one. And yet hunger persists, growing worse every year it seems. So, what does this reality say to us and about us?

Hunger is not a pleasant topic to think about, to talk about, to reflect on or even to pray about. Well, at least it isn’t if we allow ourselves to really think about what hunger is, what it means.

According to Wikipedia, hunger is:

defined as a condition in which a person does not have the physical or financial capability to eat sufficient food to meet basic nutritional needs for a sustained period. In the field of hunger relief, the term ***hunger*** is used in a sense that goes beyond the common desire for food that all humans experience, also known as an ***appetite***. The most extreme form of hunger, when malnutrition is widespread, and when people have started dying of starvation through lack of access to sufficient, nutritious food, leads to a declaration of famine.¹

Obviously, hunger in this sense is not the way we feel if we skip lunch or if we have to fast in the morning due to upcoming medical tests. But if we are really honest with ourselves, this is our only real experience with hunger – missing a meal or two. We also talk about being “really hungry” for something – like a craving for a big dish of

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunger>

our favorite ice cream or a special meal at a restaurant we can only visit on occasion. Surely, we know this is not hunger. This is appetite, as the definition we just read explains. Dear ones, let us pause for just a few moments this morning to delve in to real hunger and its impact on our lives. Let's dare to consider the kind of hunger we never think about because it's just too unpleasant to imagine, too scary to think about how close at hand hunger really is to all of us.

My mind and heart turns so frequently to Ukraine and to all the people there who only a year ago were enjoying lives much like ours. They were sharing in family meals after church on Sundays. They were having coffee with friends at sidewalk cafes. Children were eating lunch at school with their friends. Old women were trudging to the local markets for the ingredients to bake those special delicacies their now grown children loved to eat when they visited. Difficult as it is to believe, that entire way of life so like our own is gone now, blown to a million pieces in a war that everyone agrees makes no sense and yet it drags on and on. So many of those people enjoying meals at the outdoor cafes are maimed or dead, the cafes in ruins. Children and families are now living scattered in refugee resettlement areas throughout Poland and other places in Europe. Hunger is no longer a stranger in the neighborhoods of Ukraine. This teaches us a powerful lesson: Hunger has the potential in this world of ours to become all too familiar all too quickly in any neighborhood anywhere, even here.

Make no mistake, there is already hunger here in New London County, CT and in the area known as South County, RI. Just last evening I looked up some local statistics for us to consider this morning. In CT 1 in 10 adults are food insecure (at risk for hunger) as are 1 in 8 children. The numbers in RI are similar, 1 in 12 adults and 1 in 8 children. These food insecurity needs are met by a combination of private charitable programs and government assistance. It is worth

noting that charitable programs would never be able to meet these needs alone, nor would the government assistance programs on their own. The primary program which addresses this through the government is SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). On the private charitable side of the equation it is food banks and soup kitchens which attempt to fill in the gap. Think about it. It takes both the government sector *and* the private sector working together to feed all the people who need food. Plus, these statistics only reflect the people who have actually filed for assistance. Many do not. Many people are therefore going hungry, in one of the richest nations in the world. How is that even possible?

Another government program which attempts to address this issue of hunger is the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program operated by the United States Department of Agriculture. I remember when this was first introduced in Rhode Island a few decades ago and some folks in the church I was serving at the time were quite upset about it. “Why can’t *these people* feed their own kids?” was the complaint voiced over and over again. As if these families had shelves full of food and were just too lazy to put a decent meal together. I was shocked when I realized that people I knew well felt this way. Hunger was so far removed from their lives each day that they quite literally could not grasp that there were hungry kids sitting next to their kids in school each day. But there were then and there are even more today. Eligibility for free and reduced lunch at school is directly determined by what’s known as the Federal Poverty Guidelines for income established each year by the federal Health and Human Services Department. The guidelines are astonishingly low. For example, for a family of four in 2023 the maximum income would be \$30,000 or \$2500 per month. Who could possibly feed and house a family of four on that amount? That’s why a family of four is allowed

to earn up to 130% of the federal poverty guideline or \$39,000 annually/\$3250 month for their children to qualify for free lunch. The income level for reduced cost lunch goes up to \$55,500 per year/\$4625 per month. ² Looking at these numbers it's easy to see why this School Lunch Program is quite literally a lifesaver for these families. But have you ever seen the paperwork you need to fill out to qualify? And then, what kind of system will there be for your child to get this vital meal? I'm not sure what the plan is for the various schools around here now but at one point these kids were given a specially colored lunch token, so everyone knew they needed these free or reduced cost meals. Is it any wonder that kids and families can be reluctant to sign up?

And trust me when I tell you it is no easier to go to a food pantry for the first time either. The last several times I have taken our donations over to the PNC I have been encountered longer lines with many first time people. One woman was there because her daughter's hours at work had just increased which actually decreased their overall household income as other assistance programs cut their benefits due to the modest raise. Still another young man could not believe he was in line at a food pantry but with less work hours and higher gasoline prices, there just was not enough money to go around. Each person in line at a food pantry has a story. Each person there is so incredibly grateful for the assistance and even more grateful for being treated with kindness and understanding which they always are at the PNC. The WARM Center, the Jonnycake Center, the Mystic Area Shelter and Hospitality center and all the other human service agencies are doing everything they can to meet the overwhelming needs of the people slipping through the cracks of the ever widening holes in our social safety net in this country. And they do so with

²<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/>

kindness and compassion, even as they seek to make the most of the limited resources they have by carefully screening all applicants for help. The key factor they are looking for now is what's known as the resilience factor – who is willing and able to do what they need to do to help themselves get turned around. What are they doing to secure solid employment for themselves? How are they coping with the stresses they are dealing with? Are they taking advantage of the counseling and basic living skills training provided?

Make no mistake, the case managers at these human service agencies have some of the most difficult jobs around. They spend day after day listening to sad story after sad story, trying to figure out who they can realistically help and what they can realistically do. The burnout rate in these jobs is high, as you might imagine. And yet there are so many of these folks devoting their lives to trying to make a difference for the people living at the edges of our society – people so close to the edge that they can fall off at any moment; people so close to the edge that the rest of us can't even see them anymore. And that, dear ones is the problem. We can't see them anymore if we ever really saw them to begin with. We can't see them because we don't want to, or because they are obscured by all of our own problems we struggle with each day. After all, we have bills to pay, problems to solve, people we're worried about, health problems that have us scared. We don't consciously NOT see them. We just forget they're there. I mean, it's not like it's our problem anyway. Is it?

Well, this is exactly the situation our friend James was talking about in the section of the letter he wrote to one of the Pauline churches. James is trying to explain to these folks what it is that faith is really all about. And he wants them to realize it has nothing to do with wealth or status. In fact, James thinks quite the opposite. He writes in verse 5 just before today's text, "has not God chosen the poor

in the world to be rich in faith?” He goes on to remind them that Jesus clearly taught that they, and we, are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. When we understand that “neighbor” actually refers to whomever is in our proximity at any given moment, we quickly realize that Jesus clearly expects us to care for the poor and the hungry, the homeless and those clothed in rags as we would care for ourselves – as we would care for the person in our family most dear to us.

Truthfully, we just don’t do that. Not consistently anyway.

This reality is exactly what James is talking about in verse 14 when he says, “what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” In other words, if you say you follow Jesus but do not do as Jesus commands, what’s the point of calling yourself a Christian? But James doesn’t stop there. Not hardly. “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” James gets it. He really does. If someone is in need and you do nothing, what does that say about your faith? What does it say about you?

The thing is, though, that the world is not nearly so black and white as James imagines. At least not these days when people are always trying to scam their way through life. Baby formula has to be locked up these days because people were either stealing it to sell on the black market or purchasing it with WIC benefits, again to resell at a huge profit. Scammers and grifters are truly evil because they feed into all those stories about folks on public assistance not really needing it. So efforts to cut benefits increase which only ends up pushing people deeper into the poverty that keeps them trapped. Scammers and grifters plague social service agencies causing them to put procedures in place to insure that people are who they say are,

that they really do need the help they are asking for, that they really do want to do whatever it takes to lift themselves out of poverty.

The simple truth is, dear ones, that this is our reality in 2023, right here in our little corner of the world. The entire social safety net of our country is ripped and fraying more and more every day. So, we must ask ourselves, what are you and I supposed to do about it? What is God expecting us to do about it? What is Jesus nudging us to consider? How might the Holy Spirit inspire us to creative thinking and, like James says, DO something? Well, these are the kinds of things our Missions folks are wrestling with. This is why we as a church are serving as the home base for Operation Fresh Start. This is why we are currently inviting your support of the food initiatives of our local agencies. These donations to the PNC really do make a difference. The funds we're collecting for WARM go directly to their daily soup kitchen operations. Yes, we are doing something as a congregation, but we are only as effective in these efforts as you make possible. One can of soup matters to the PNC. One five dollar bill matters to the WARM Center. It all matters. I know sometimes like it seems we're always asking you to do something, to give to something to donate something all the time. We are, because the need is so great. Because it is what God expects of us.

James tells us in no uncertain terms that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Dear ones, we do not have a dead faith in this church and, God willing, we never will. We are a faithful church of doers who do what we can as we can, knowing that there are no small efforts. Every effort that is heartfelt and sincere is huge. Our call as members and friends of this church is to reveal to others our living faith by doing something, however small the effort might be, to make a real difference in the lives of folks around us who are suffering – from hunger, from lack of shelter, from the sickness of the soul

resulting from such profound existential trauma. Simply put, if we can see the need, we must figure out a way to meet the need. This is our challenge from God. This is our task assigned to us by Jesus Christ himself. So ... now what? Let's figure it out together... Amen.