

## PURPLE ZONE SERMON #1

Land of Plenty?

Isaiah 58:6-9

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Last weekend for our Chili Supper, I decided to try my hand at making a pot of this delicious fall delicacy. Since I was the one cooking it, please hear with the word “delicious” in quotes. I drove to the store about five minutes from my house to buy my ingredients, which totaled around \$56. I spent a couple hours making the chili, then on Sunday put it in line with the other crockpots at the Chili Supper. It may not have been as scrumdiddlyumptious as the other chili offerings, but it was edible. At this time, I have yet to hear any report cases of food poisoning in the congregation, so I’m thinking that I really nailed this “making chili” thing.

Sounds simple enough, right? I’m sure some of you did the same thing I did. But think about how much we take for granted just in that story alone. I had the luxury of driving to the store, a store which was only five minutes from my house. I had the resources to spend \$56 on a recipe for food that would mostly feed others, not my family or me. I had the gift of two hours to prepare the chili and a loving church family kind enough not to tell me if it tasted bad. Do you see how much we take for granted? What if I didn’t have the transportation, the convenient grocery store, the money, the time, the abundance of food to share with others? So many people in this country, even in this city, don’t have those luxuries.

Hunger and food insecurity are economic issues, because how we pay people and how we support economic development in our community affects how easy or difficult it is for people to have access to healthy food. They are also political issues, because the decisions and policies of our government leaders have an impact on how the government controls or supports feeding those who struggle financially. But these are also spiritual issues because, as we’ll see, God has something to say about our role in making sure the hungry get fed.

Can we talk about this kind of thing at Crestwood? I guarantee that if we dig down into the foundational issues around food insecurity and food inequality in Lexington, toes will be stepped on because it is an economic and political issue. And yet, because it is also a spiritual issue, if we don’t talk about these things, we are ignoring the very voice of God, who says in the Isaiah passage I read that one of the fasts God chooses for us is to share our bread – and our chili! – with the hungry. So, how do we as Christ-followers talk about potentially divisive issues without dividing?

In September, Warren Rogers and I attending a workshop at Lexington Theological Seminary called “Dialogue in the Purple Zone.” The workshop, led by professor Dr. Leah Schade and others, introduced us to a process called deliberative dialogue, a method of conversation that invites participants to see controversial issues from different perspectives, thus increasing everyone’s empathetic understanding of how the issue is perceived and how it affects others.

The “purple” in “purple zone” comes from the combining of the “red” and “blue” colors that divide our country politically. As Christians, we are called to the dichotomous existence of living out our individual beliefs while still coming to the table each Sunday as one family. As Disciples of Christ, we believe that unity is our polar star, a core value that defines us here at Crestwood. But unity doesn’t mean uniformity, and we’re all aware of the political and theological diversity that is represented in this sanctuary today. How can we plant our flag in the “purple zone,” modeling for our community how to disagree without being disagreeable?

One response might be, “We shouldn’t.” I know plenty of folks that believe the church should stay out of controversial issues, that what we say and do on Sunday has very little to do with how we vote on Tuesday. And yet, even a quick scan of scripture shows that the prophets didn’t shy away from what could be considered in our times hot-button issues. In our Isaiah passage, God “gets political,” speaking through Isaiah to upbraid the Israelites for going through the motions of worship without ensuring that justice is in place and that people have enough to eat, clothes on their backs, and safe places to live. In other words, walking the walk of faith means structuring society in such a way that everyone has equal access to the things they need, not only to survive, but to thrive. Simply put, we are called by God to care for each other.

Isaiah says, “You can fast all you want, but that’s not what God wants.” What does God want? Isaiah says, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” The Israelites thought fasting meant not eating bread, but God says true fasting is breaking bread with the hungry. That’s just one of hundreds of examples where God calls us to pay attention to the spiritual dimensions of the economic and social issues around us.

So, what Warren and I will be doing is leading you all through a deliberative dialogue process around the issue of food insecurity. Here’s how the process will work. I’m preaching this sermon today to introduce the topic. Then, next Sunday, Warren will host a deliberative dialogue process, where you’ll have the opportunity to look at this issue of food and justice from a number of different sides. Then, on Nov. 24, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I’ll preach a second sermon based upon our dialogue from the previous week to hear how God might be calling us to address this issue in our community.

We hope this dialogue will do a couple things. First, we hope it will help us learn more about the issue of food insecurity in our community. On this side of Lexington, we have a plethora of grocery store options, from Kroger and Aldi’s to high-end stores like Fresh Market and Whole Foods. On the north side of Lexington, they have...nothing except gas stations and convenience stores that only sell highly processed, unhealthy foods. Is it reasonable to expect someone to live healthily off a Speedway diet? The north side what sociologists call a “food desert.” What is God calling us to do about situations like these?

But more than just addressing the issue at hand, we also hope this process will help us grow stronger as a community of faith. As we move into a pivotal and potentially potent presidential election, the danger of divisiveness will always be lurking around us. When Isaiah talked about fasting, I wish he had something about fasting from social media during an election year! This next year is going to yank at the fabric that holds many congregations together, including ours. We can’t just ignore what will be going on around us, but we also can’t fall into the trap of our larger society in which people try to convince other people how wrong they are by talking LOUDER and using more derogatory terms. There has to be a better way. My hope is that through the deliberative dialogue process, we can learn how to talk about these pressing issues in ways that strengthen our bonds as members of Crestwood and children of God.

The other hope I have for this process is that we come out of it with concrete actions we can all agree on that will help us address these issues in ways that reflect God’s love and care for others. No matter what the issue is, God can help us find common ground, even among people who are polar opposites. If we can focus on the things upon which we agree, rather than dwelling on the things that divide us, we can better model what God’s kingdom here on earth looks like,

and we can work together as the body of Christ to find solutions to some of our society's more difficult problems.

This is about more than just feeding hungry people. This is about pleasing God. God chastises the Israelites for going through the motions of worship and fasting, doing those things to get God's attention rather than to make a difference in this world. What happens when we answer God's call to make sure the hungry are fed? Isaiah says, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am." In other words, if you want to see God, if you want to know that God is present, look into the eyes of someone who is hungry and offer them bread. That's where we'll see God.

Coming here on Sunday to give your praise and thanksgiving and offering is a part of faith, but it's not all of it. Faith also includes going from this place to make sure what you heard in here is being done out there, things like sharing your bread with the hungry. This land produces more than enough food to feed every single person in our community. We here at Crestwood are blessed with more than enough. Through this process, I pray we are able to see how our abundance can be the solution to someone else's scarcity, so that all are fed in this land of plenty.

Right now, there is a child in our city who is hungry and has no food to eat. Despite our political affiliations and theological leanings, that should make every single one of us visibly upset. Paul says, "When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer." I would add that when one part of the body is hungry, we all feel those pangs. May our dedication to serving God and our commitment to loving our neighbors compel us to participate in this dialogue process, so that we can build stronger relationships with each other, learn to talk about controversial issues, and, most importantly of all, so that we can find ways to share our bread with the hungry that are in our midst.