

Land of Plenty Pt. 2
John 6:25-35
Nov. 24, 2019
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

What are you doing for Thanksgiving this year? Some of you may be opening your homes to friends and family, preparing to host a gaggle of folks who will bring a nice side dish, help you clean up after the big dinner, and then fall into a turkey-induced coma during the football games. Others of you may be on the road, traveling to see family so that you can spend this holiday together, eating together and visiting together and falling into turkey-induced comas together. But I would guess, one way or another, just about all of us have Thanksgiving plans. We may not know exactly where we'll be eating, but we know we'll be eating, and there will be more than enough. Therefore, it's hard for us to imagine not knowing where our next meal will come from, and yet that's exactly the situation for many of our brothers and sisters right here in Lexington.

Two weeks ago, I preached a sermon called "Land of Plenty" in which I talked about the topic of hunger and food insecurity in Lexington. The sermon was a part of a process in which Crestwood has been invited to participate. In September, Warren Rogers and I attended a workshop at Lexington Theological Seminary called "Dialogue in the Purple Zone." The workshop, led by 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. In short, we were trying to answer the question: Can we talk about divisive issues without dividing? Can we disagree without being disagreeable?

In that first sermon, I talked about how I hoped that this process would not only help us come up with real, tangible action steps to combat hunger and food insecurity in Lexington, but also help us grow closer and stronger as a congregation as we talked about issues that directly affect us, but about which we don't all agree. It's only by talking through these issues – and more importantly, listening to others as they talk – that we can better understand how people hold viewpoints different than ours. The more we understand all sides of an issue, the better chance we have of talking civilly and productively about it.

A week ago, Warren and I hosted our deliberative dialogue about food insecurity. We had 24 people in attendance, so we divided into two groups to talk about this issue more in depth. We shared a discussion guide, which gave us some talking points and options to consider how to address hunger and food insecurity. And then we talked. And listened. And talked some more. And listened some more. And in the midst of it all, the Holy Spirit moved through us to give us a greater understanding of the issue and each other.

The first question was, for me, the most powerful. We asked people to share what personal stake they had in this issue. Why did hunger and food insecurity matter to them? Several people talked about how they had grown up poor and had faced food insecurity themselves. A couple were teachers who had dealt with students who didn't have enough to eat. And several were simply concerned about the issue and how it affects the well-being of our brothers and sisters here in Lexington. Did you know that one in six Kentucky families experience food insecurity in a given year? We all know someone who deals with this.

The conversations about the issues were rich, robust, and filled with compassion for those who don't have enough to eat. For example, we talked about the enormous amount of waste that

is produced in the US. Someone shared the staggering statistic that 40% of the food produced in the US never gets consumed. Sound unbelievable? Think about the food left over at catered parties, the food prepared at restaurants that never gets served, the perishable food in the grocery stores that doesn't sell. We have more than enough, but forty percent doesn't seem so far-fetched. How many more people could we feed with only one-fourth of the food we waste? We don't have a production problem, we have a distribution problem.

We also recognized that so much of the malnutrition and under-feeding in our community is because of lack of education and access. If people don't know the four food groups or what a balanced diet is, how are they expected to eat in a way that helps them stay healthy? And with such a lack of quality grocery stores on the north side of Lexington, even if someone wanted to eat well, getting access to a grocery store can be a challenge. This issue isn't just about food. It's about education, transportation, socio-economic disparity, and prejudice.

Once our two groups had finished discussing the issues, we came back together to see where we had common ground. This is such an important part of the deliberative dialogue process, because it allows you to connect with people with whom you disagree. Let's say two people had very different ideas about how we should help people get food. One wants more government subsidies, while the other wants better education. Even though they have very different ways of getting to a solution, they both agree that no one should go hungry.

That's an important point of overlap to keep in mind as we prepare to pull up a chair to the cornucopia of food at the Thanksgiving table. My guess is none of that food will go to waste; we'll be eating turkey and dressing and pumpkin pie for days. But it's important to remember that God not only wants us to have our daily bread, but God wants those around us to eat, as well. If we are fed but others are not, we are falling short of the kingdom of God. We don't have a production problem, we have a distribution problem.

That feeding is not just physical. In our passage today, Jesus has just fed the five thousand people with just a turkey leg and half a pecan pie and his disciples are trying to figure out what in the world is going on. Jesus tells them that not only can he provide bread to be eaten, but also nourishment for the soul. "I am the bread of life," he says. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

I went gluten-free about eight years ago, and of all the food I miss, the one I miss the most is a breadstick from Joe Bologna's. If you've never had one, it's like the Mona Lisa of breadsticks. It's a huge piece of warm, gluten-y goodness that you can dip in marinara sauce or garlic butter. I think that breadstick is as close to the real bread of life as we can get. And yet, even that doesn't compare to what Jesus offers us. It's more than bread for our stomachs, it's bread for our souls. We are fed when we are following Jesus.

We talked in the deliberative dialogue about how we can do that. We had a feast of ideas about how we at Crestwood can make a difference in our community when it comes to hunger and food insecurity. What makes it difficult for us is that we're not exactly situated in a place of great need. First, we are located on the south side of Lexington, which tends to be more socio-economically stable and have much better access to healthy sources of food. Think of the number of grocery stores within a five-mile radius of this church.

In addition to that, we're situated in a neighborhood where I would imagine very few people deal with food insecurity. Because of that, it would be easy for us to get complacent about this issue. I had a number of people come up to me after the first sermon on this topic to say they had no idea this was an issue in Lexington. But one group knew and that was teachers, because they see it every day in their schools. If you want to know the biggest problems in our city, ask a

teacher, because they are wiser than anyone gives them credit for. It's so easy for us to get caught up in our daily lives that we don't even see the need just a few miles away because it's not right outside our doorstep. But it's there.

So, if we're truly following Jesus, then we're not just following him to church or to Thanksgiving Day lunch. We're also following him to the Hope Center food kitchen, to the God's Pantry warehouse, to the Nest with the 300 food boxes we are putting together. We know for a fact we have people to feed. One in six families in Kentucky deal with food insecurity in a given year. We have the means to make sure people get fed. And that means leaving Bellefonte Drive and heading to Loudon Avenue and Sixth Street and other places where it might be scary for us, but where the real need is. We don't have a production problem; we have a distribution problem. And that's on us.

So, what's next? Well, that's up to you. I'd like to convene a group of people who are interested in this topic for a discussion of what we can do to make a difference. If you are interested in being a part of that, send me an email or write your name on a piece of paper and give it to me, because I guarantee with absolute certainty that if you just tell me this morning, I'll forget before I get to my car. We have the resources to make a difference, friends. It's up to use to decide if we want to do it or not.

In a few minutes, we're going to come to this table, which is set for us by Jesus Christ. On this table will be bread, purchased for a couple of dollars at a local grocery store. You are invited to take a piece and eat it as a reminder that Jesus Christ is the living bread that sustains us through all of life's trials. But you are also called to remember that, just as this bread feeds our souls, we are called to feed the stomachs of those who are hungry. Over and over again, God calls us in scripture to feed those who don't have enough food, and then God gives us the ultimate feast in the person of Jesus Christ. We have been fed. Our cups overflow with God's abundance. And yet, people are still hungry for the bread of life and for actual bread. I pray that the food we eat this Thanksgiving never tastes as good as it should until we know that everyone is eating. Christ has given us the bread to feed the souls and the stomachs of the world. No one should be hungry.