

Sermon November 22
Deacon Nick Bates,
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Peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen

It is a true blessing to be with you all today. My name is Nick Bates and I am a Deacon in our Southern Ohio Synod and serve as the director of the Hunger Network in Ohio – an ecumenical ministry of Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and many others who believe we can hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty through public policy advocacy. We are honored to serve as the State Advocacy Ministry here in Ohio as well.

My bet is that you have done something in your congregation to help those who are hungry. Have you donated food to a canned food drive? Drop some loose change into a kettle for a noisy offering? Volunteered to serve or cook for local homeless shelter or serve a community meal at your congregation?

There are so many ministries that we do each and every day that help provide those who are hungry with food.

In our Gospel lesson today, this is a part of God's work for us in the world. Simply put, Jesus says love those who are called less than by our human institutions. Not only are we to do good to them, but we are called to assume that they are a status equal to God – we are called to honor them, treat with dignity, and love.

But loving somebody is more than just a sandwich. *The sandwich is an important part of it*, but we cannot forget how this parable begins. Jesus says, that **all the nations will gather before the king to be divided as sheep or goats. We aren't called individually.** This is a group project for us as humanity. Our call to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned is not only about our individual choices, but our commitment as a community to love one another.

Too often, though, we get sucked into thinking of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked as a math problem. If I do enough good, then God will put me individually with the good sheep.

Jesus isn't giving a personal morality list of do's and don'ts. This isn't a question of *'If I feed three people today, do I have welcomed any strangers? If I serve a meal on the holidays, does that count as double?'* **This isn't philanthropy math; this is a call to orient our community as people of faith toward those that society wants to treat as less than.**

So, if this judgement occurred today, where would our country be? Where would our congregations and communities be? Where would our world be? We would all be placed with the goats. We have fallen short of providing the dignity and love to those who hunger and thirst in our world.

Hunger is up.

Our communities are divided by race and class.

Our prisons are our largest mental health provider because it is easier to lock people up than to offer the treatment needed.

Despite the Church's efforts to solve hunger and poverty by ourselves, we cannot do this alone. Our private charity is no substitution for a public commitment.

Our nation and world have failed to feed those who hunger, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. We fail to truly see those who are struggling as equal status to God.

We fail at this work because we focus on our service to others and do not see the image of God in those that we serve. We approach our charity work, too often, *as us and them*. The feeding, the visiting, and caring isn't about the work we do. Instead it is about God reversing our hierarchies and status. Not only does Jesus say that those who society puts on the bottom are valuable, but Jesus equates their status to God. They are holy children of God who deserve their daily bread. Just as we are called to kneel and be servants to God, we are called to be servants to those in our communities who are struggling the most.

PAUSE

Luckily, God's grace and forgiveness exists for us. Through Christ, our imperfections and shortcomings are forgiven. Because we are goats in our own brokenness, Christ has made us sheep, despite our shortcomings as individuals and as a nation, God heals broken relationships with us.

We are all broken and there is no easy way to fix the brokenness of human relationship. **Hunger exists because of broken human relationships in the world. Hunger exists** in many places because of war and violence. **Hunger exists** because we place profit over nutrition for children and senior citizens. **Hunger exists** because it is easier to ignore our own shortcomings than to make hard choices as a society to end it.

But through the waters of our baptism, we receive God's forgiveness and our broken relationship with God is healed. God invites us – as imperfect as we are- into Holy work in the world.

We are not only called to feed those who hunger today, but to heal the broken relationships in our world, in our economy, in our public policies that caused the hunger in the first place.

Pause

At the Hunger Network in Ohio, we do faith-based advocacy. We build relationships with lawmakers, community leaders, and those struggling to put food on the table. We seek to bring the stories and voices of those who hunger into the public sphere so that they can be the priority of our public and community actions.

Faith based advocacy is not about political party or ideology, instead it is about helping our lawmakers ask the right questions and help them to identify possible solutions to our community's most pressing needs.

The Church has answers lawmakers need. The Church is uniquely situated to bring together rich and poor, those with excess and those who with scarcity, those with felonies and those who have never received a traffic ticket. When we build this community, we do not see ourselves as *us and them*, as the world treats us, instead we form a divine and beloved community.

In April, the Hunger Network surveyed more than 100 social ministry organizations in Ohio to see how they were adapting to the pandemic and what needs existed. Our survey produced excellent information about new needs that were arising the resources needed for success. For example, in urban and rural areas, we had congregations setting up wireless hot spots in their parking lots to help students finish the school year. These stories have filtered to our lawmakers and now they are getting serious about expanding internet access and close the digital divide.

Advocacy is about sharing stories and our compassion with policymakers. It is about trying to take small steps to reconcile communities and people that are divided.

Pause

Today is the final Sunday of 2020 in the church calendar. We made it through an anxiety filled year! As we begin a new year next week let us ask ourselves, our congregations and our newly elected community leaders:

How can we end hunger in our community?

How can we improve our prison and justice system to better serve all the people?

How can we fix our broken immigration system to show love to the stranger?

After an election cycle that divided communities and families, we might not want to engage in difficult questions. **But that is what our Christian freedom is for.** We are freed for something. The World needs the church to be engaged, **because we are church for the sake of the world.** These are hard questions to ask and even harder ones to answer. Likely, we all have different answers to these, but can't we agree that these should be the questions we attempt to answer, the problems that we need to solve? Because of God's love we have been freed to ask them.

No one politician has the answer. Governors, Presidents, and state legislators all are also imperfect humans. All of our policies that we pass will also fall short of the glory of God. But

faith-based advocacy works to bring people to a table together to try and figure out answers. Whether you voted for Joe Biden or Donald Trump, whether you voted third party or abstained from this election, It doesn't matter now. This doesn't mean that election don't matter. They absolutely do. But we cannot place our faith in any elected leader to solve problems on their own. They need the Church to guide them, to call them out, to help them see through the noise and hear the voice of those most vulnerable.

God is calling on us to lift up those that society seeks to push down. **God is calling** on us to see the image of God in those who are marginalized and ridiculed. **God is calling on us** to help guarantee everyone their daily bread. As the church our public leaders need us to set a moral compass so that they remember to treat those who are called least as Kings.

As people of faith we are called to holy work in the world. We will fall short. We are imperfect, we make mistakes, but because Christ has already proclaimed that we are sheep and not goats, it means that we are freed to do this messy and difficult work of healing broken relationship that exists in our world.

It is easy to become cynical because our world is very broken. It is easy to think that we can never end hunger and poverty, but we can.

And when we want to throw up our hands in exhaustion and frustration at the hard work we are called to do, bring them down and fold them in prayer and ask God to guide us toward hope and the belief that we can end hunger in our communities.

The election is over, but our work to shape our communities and prioritize those who hunger and thirst is just beginning. We will lift up and echo the voices of the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned, **for in their voices we will hear the voice of God. God is with us as we journey forward. Emmanuel – God with us.**

The most fitting way to end a sermon before Advent.

Amen.