

REACHing Through Faith

October 8, 2023

Heifer Sunday

There are few things more gratifying than coming together to make a tangible difference in other people's lives. In 1944, a man by the name of Dan West began outlining a vision for tackling hunger around the world. You've heard the proverb, "Give someone a fish and they eat for a day; teach them to fish and they will have food for a lifetime." Dan West's vision worked on that model.

A farmer from the Midwest and member of the Church of the Brethren, one of the so called "peace churches," Dan had just returned to the U.S. after doing humanitarian work amidst the Spanish Civil War. Amidst profound tragedy and poverty, he had seen the proverb play out. Connecting people with animals and crops provides them with nutritious food as well as a way out of abject poverty.

Fast forward more than 75 years and Heifer International is still doing this life-altering ministry. In our Heifer Living Gift Market each year, Union always highlights the most fundamental model of Heifer. A family is given a pair of animals – a pair of chickens or goats or sheep – taught how to raise them and utilize their byproducts, and, when they reproduce, the family commits to giving away a pair to neighbors, who will in turn have opportunities they didn't before. You'll have this opportunity again this year, to sponsor everything from a hive of honey bees to a pair of water buffalo.

But addressing global poverty takes so much more than handing someone two alpacas. For instance, when disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes strike, many farmers lose their most valuable assets – livestock. This was the case in 2010, when that devastating earthquake hit Haiti. Heifer International's post-earthquake assessment found that almost every family in rural Haiti raised at least one type of livestock, but most had never received any animal wellbeing training, meaning their farms were operating well below production capacity. With hunger and poverty still impacting many Haitians in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, Heifer launched the Rural Entrepreneurs for Agricultural Cooperation in Haiti project, also known as REACH. It's a comprehensive plan to restore rural livelihoods by promoting sustainable food production.

For decades, Haitian farmers have grappled with poor quality soil, a lack of tools and expertise to grow their farms, and poor roads, limiting their ability to get their products to markets. Before the REACH project began, there were only 75 registered veterinarians in the whole of Haiti and no veterinary schools. As a result, demand for meat and dairy far exceeded domestic supply, even though UN development goals identify animal protein as an important component of raising nutrition levels and decreasing poverty. Over a five-year period, the REACH project supported farmers as they learned and adopted modern farming practices, improving the productivity of their farms in a sustainable way, protecting local resources like soil and water. Communities organized themselves into self-help groups that identified needs within their community and then set about creating plans to address them. With women and youth among the most vulnerable to disasters, Heifer focused on equipping them with the skills they needed to build modern, successful farms that provide them with a reliable source of income.

Working closely with these locally led groups, Heifer identified, recruited and trained 120 people who live and work within farming communities on animal health and wellbeing. This created

new, local jobs and gave farmers access to a wide range of knowledge and resources to make their farms more productive. Heifer then set up 75 local animal breeding centers to improve the quality of breeds on local farms and create more local jobs. And their experts worked with farmers to diversify the crops growing on their farms, producing locally grown nutritious food that also gave them another source of income. As farmers expanded their farms and improved their production processes, Heifer provided business training so they could manage their accounts, get access to finance, find new markets for their products and continue to scale up their businesses.

Scripture

Now, some might ask what training veterinarians and diversifying crops have to do with following Jesus. To answer that, I turn your attention back to today's scriptures.

Our passage from Leviticus begins, "When you harvest your land, don't harvest right up to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings from the harvest. Don't strip your vineyard bare or go back and pick up the fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am God, your God."

"To glean" is to gather up the produce that is leftover in the field after the harvest. Our passage today tells us to make sure, as producers, that we don't gather everything up, that we don't even harvest up to the edges, so that some of what we've produced will be available to sustain the poor and foreigners. Once more with feeling: we are implored by the scriptures to make sure there is enough for those on the margins, on the fringes.

Remember, one of the major themes of the Old Testament is how to create a Godly community, how to live together well. Today's passage does a marvelous job of that, and it starts with the primacy of sharing with those in need. What's more, in Psalm 19 we start with a poetic description of the natural world, followed by a reflection on the laws of God. The Psalmist tells us that, even if we don't know or understand God through our religious experience, God will reveal God's self and God's ways through our experience of the natural world.

"Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands, telling of the glory of God to the ends of the earth."

Heifer's Work Areas

A couple of years ago on Heifer Sunday, we focused on their five major work areas and so, while they're worth noting, I won't belabor those this year. The first and central work area, the one we know the most about, is Food Security and Nutrition. "With increased productivity of livestock and crops, farmers provide for their families and improve the health of their communities."

But over the years, Heifer has come to understand the complexity of global poverty alleviation, and so, has added four other major work areas: the REACH program in Haiti that I highlighted is part of Heifer's Risk Mitigation and Resilience work area: Knowing that people in poverty have very little margin, Heifer works with people "to shift from subsistence to sustainability, from reliance on others to resilience."

Heifer also works on Women's Empowerment and Social Capital: Knowing that "investing in women is key to ending hunger and poverty," women's empowerment is "at the very center of

Heifer's community development approach." They also work on Environmental Sustainability: Heifer understands that the effects of climate change and pollution disproportionately affect the poor, and so is committed to working with farmers and experts to farm sustainably, understanding that the future of our existence and our economy is caught up with the health of the planet.

This brings us back to Psalm 19. God's ways are woven into all of creation. With that as a principle tenant, Heifer promotes agroecology and works with farmers to protect local ecosystems and biodiversity, deploy soil and water conservation techniques, and reduce carbon footprints. Their expert staff works with farmers as they integrate climate-smart agricultural practices on their farms to increase resilience and crop production. Heifer supports biogas plants that provide clean energy to local households, and irrigation projects that use water more efficiently.

Heifer's fifth and final work area is Economic Development: Heifer promotes the long game, building resilience with individual communities, whereby people are able to envision what their future looks like and see what is possible. Heifer's mission is to help them build it.

Conclusion

Friends, along with holding our Heifer Living Gift Market today, we're in the midst of our annual pledge campaign. Our theme this year is, "Union: Love in Action." Your pledge cards have started to trickle in. We are deeply grateful for the pledges you made to the Capital Campaign this spring which will allow us to do much needed repairs to our building and resource some of our vital Outreach ministry.

Now, your pledges to the fall budget campaign are critical to sustaining that vitality. With this in hand, I lift up something Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

I'm deeply humbled at how profoundly you have given yourselves to God in Christ.

You are smart.

You are savvy.

You are generous.

AND, in your faith, you have a vision of a different world.

A world in which people across the world have access to sustainable nutrition like that promoted by Heifer International. A world in which the inclusion and justice work that this church does thrives. Like Paul, I know, "It doesn't matter how much you have. What matters is how much you are willing to give from what you have." And, like Paul, I know that you will deliver, because Union's superpower is putting God's love into action. Thanks be to you, and thanks be to God!

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels

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Psalm 19; Leviticus 19:9-18

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