

Hatching Hope

October 6, 2024

An Egg of Generosity

Many of you have participated in our New Member classes over the past decade, and so you've heard the story that one of the life changing experiences in my call to ministry was the trip I took to El Salvador in 1992 at the end of that country's civil war. For those of you who haven't heard the story, the broadest of brushstrokes are that a couple of friends and I accompanied one of our Religious Studies professors to El Salvador as she did some final research for her dissertation.

While there, we spent the majority of time digging latrines and registering people to vote. We lived in a tiny village that had been decimated during the war. Everyone had fled to Guatemala years before, and when we arrived, about 15 households had returned to the land about six months prior. They had nothing. The houses were made of sticks and had thatch roofs. There was one common lean-to where they would all gather, but no stores, no businesses of any kind. There was a well with a pump about 20 minutes away, where the women would walk every morning to get water.

My professor had a relationship with these people from when they were back in Guatemala, so had sent word through various contacts that we were looking for lodging, and had heard back that they were eager to receive us. The transportation we secured out of San Salvador was in the bed of a rusty old pickup truck, and we crammed in with us two weeks worth of bottled water for our crew, since we have delicate U.S. stomachs. After we arrived in the tiny little village of Calderas and had sorted out who would stay with each household, they laid out a feast for us: rice and beans and eggs and mangos.

Except we quickly realized that none of our hosts were eating eggs. These people who we had come to try to help had scrounged and saved to buy an egg for each of us from a woman in the village over the mountain who had some chickens. We were dumbfounded by their hospitality and generosity. For the rest of the month we spent with them, we ate what they did: rice for breakfast, rice and beans for lunch, and beans for dinner, as well as many mangos as we wanted from the tree on the way to get water.

But that first night, they gave everything they had, not just from their abundance, not just from their excess. They sacrificed to give to our group, who really didn't NEED anything. Their generosity and hospitality schooled us.

The Scriptures

This story comes to mind this morning as we're celebrating not only Union's annual Heifer Living Gift Market but also World Communion Sunday. For decades, Union has been hosting a yearly event to raise funds for Heifer International, a nonprofit established over 75 years ago to connect people with animals and crops to provide them with nutritious food as well as a way out of abject poverty. 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 honeybees to a pair of water buffalo.

A decade before Dan West initiated the Heifer Project, Rev. Hugh Thomson Kerr wanted to demonstrate the interconnectedness of Christian churches and started promoting what he called World Communion Sunday, a yearly celebration in which participating churches remember that, while there may be a lot about our churches that is different, there's still more that we hold in common. On World Communion Sunday, we celebrate Communion (obviously), and we also try to lift up that which we hold in common with the broad community of Jesus' followers.

These two celebrations – our annual Heifer Living Gift Market and World Communion Sunday – actually fit really well together and dovetail perfectly with the Gospel passage I read for us today. As the hour grew late, the disciples came to Jesus and suggested to him that he ought to send away the crowd that had gathered to hear him, but Jesus' response is:

“You give them something to eat.”

“You give them something to eat.”

Feed the hungry people in your midst. Take care of the hungry people in front of you. Sounds like Heifer International and World Communion Sunday, doesn't it?

Over the years, there have been numerous interpretations of this miracle, but the one that resonates most with me is that Jesus' teaching inspired everyone's generosity. They pulled out the bags of Cheerios they had stashed at the bottom of their bags, the apples they had in their pockets, the heel of bread they had brought with just in case, and everyone, even those who hadn't come prepared, had enough. In fact, there was even more at the end than Jesus had blessed in the beginning.

And THAT might be the most profound lesson of all in this story. Somehow, when we're generous, when we put our resources toward caring for others, there ends up being more. I know it's not logical, but every time I observe a profound act of generosity, I see abundance overflow.

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. One is their Risk Mitigation and Resilience work area: With hurricanes so much on our minds right now and 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 because statistically, “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 they are 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 26. God's ways are woven into all of creation. With that as a principle tenant, Heifer promotes agro-ecology and works with farmers to protect local ecosystems and biodiversity, deploy soil and water conservation techniques, and reduce carbon footprints. Their expert staff work with farmers as they integrate climate-smart agricultural practices on their farms to increase resilience and crop production. Heifer supports 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

We could go on, but I'm conscious that we have some four-legged guests outside who are much more interesting than I am. How I'll wrap things up is by bringing the story from my time in El Salvador full circle. The generosity of our hosts on that first night stuck with us, as did the practice of Latin American Bible Study that our professor was immersing us in. Latin American Bible Study is similar to the practice of Lectio Divina which I've shared here before, in which you read a Bible passage several times and listen for how it is speaking to you. In Latin American Bible Study, you read the same passage several times and ask, "How am I going to put this lesson into practice for the greater good?"

It seemed like everywhere we went that semester, the passage we read as our Gospel today was the one we kept hearing, the one that we kept being asked to pray about how we were going to put its lesson into practice. We were sitting in the sweltering heat under the shade of a mango tree about a month after we'd moved on from our little village when inspiration struck us. We pulled out what little money we had and pooled it together to get our hosts several dozen chickens and what they needed to care for them!

That, my friends, is the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Our hosts' generosity begat our generosity. Never in a million years when my professor sent word to them, asking if they could shelter a dozen college students from the U.S. for a month did they imagine that it would result in a gift that would alter their economic and nutritional path, and yet our gift was just the natural convergence of praying the Gospel and receiving their generosity.

Friends, even more than hoping that we once again raise \$5,000 in order to sponsor an ark through Heifer, my prayer is that your prayer will be "how am I going to put Christ's lessons into practice." When we do, all of creation will be one step closer to the reign of God. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Psalm 26, Mark 6:34-44
October 6, 2024