

800 MILLION STORIES

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Deuteronomy 24:17 - 22~God's people care.

Psalm 112

Mark 12:28 – 31~Loving God and our neighbors

I want to start with a question this morning? How many of you remember whether or not you liked the crust of your bread during your growing up years? I certainly do. Whenever we tried to leave them my mom would say we had to remember all the hungry children in the world who did not have bread and we better eat them. She also tried to tell us that eating our crusts would make our hair curly. That didn't work but I certainly do understand now about the hungry children.

- Everyday more than 16, 000 children die from hunger related causes – one every five seconds.
- Malnutrition in children contributes to over half of child deaths.
- 70% of those who suffer from hunger are women and girls
- 80% of people in developing countries depend on non-wood forest products such as fruits and herbs for primary health and nutrition
- the number of hungry people is rising: 852 million people (up 10 million from a year ago) in the 2000 to 2002 period 9 million of them live in industrialized countries

There are 800 million plus stories of hungry people. I'd like to share this one with you.

This is Roosevelt's story. My name is Roosevelt and I am 8 years old. In the last week, I have eaten only a small bowl of rice and some bad tasting leaves. I live in Liberia, West Africa, but my family and I had to run away from our home because people came to our village and started shooting people. My dad and my eldest brother were killed. I have been hiding in the forest with my mom, my older sister and my two young brothers. I have had stomach pains and headaches, but mostly I just feel weak and faint. There is a Liberian Proverb that says, "*A hungry man is an angry man*". I have noticed that when people in my village are hungry, they sometimes fight with each other and get mad easily. Because they are hungry but have so little food, people have started to eat things that they would not normally eat, like roots, leaves and even bark. The strange food has made some people sick. I now get sick very easily too. I have diarrhea many times, which also keeps me weak and unable to do much. I have lost weight. My mom says that I am so light that I am very easy to pick up. Our family is walking to a special camp set up for people who have had to leave their homes. At the camp, churches and other groups provide food like wheat, beans, and oil. Also, there is a program for children like me who need special attention and care. Children with malnutrition are given special food and medical treatment to make sure that they become healthy and regain their weight. I really want to be heavy enough so my mother can't pick me up. This is one of 800 million plus stories.

Today is World Food Day. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations celebrates World Food Day on October 16, the date of its founding. The Theme for 2005 is “Agriculture and Intercultural Dialogue”. It offers an opportunity to reflect on the many skills required to grow food, the many foods that have traveled the globe and the need to continue to learn about who and how food is grown. Christian World Services is deeply concerned about the changing agricultural practices and policies that are robbing some of the world’s poorest people of their means of livelihood and therefore sustenance. As I said before, the Food and Agriculture Organization State of Food Insecurity reports that there are now 852 million people who do not have enough to eat. Of the people living with hunger globally, 50% of them are small farmers. Advances in growing techniques, seed varieties and breeding have not helped many small farmers, peasants and fisher folk to improve their lot. Instead millions of families have been forced off their land or from their coasts by the demands of large farming enterprises, environmental degradation and transnational corporations. Even the varieties of food that are eaten are diminishing and the global diet is increasingly based on fewer staples grains like wheat and rice and with greater emphasis on meat, dairy products, edible oil, salt and sugar. At the same time the integration of global food sources means that the 30 largest supermarket chains now account for about one third of food sales worldwide and domestic supermarket chains are contracting a very limited number of suppliers to produce the products they sell.

Many on the world stage are advocating that the poorest countries can trade themselves out of poverty and to this end are arguing for the conclusion of the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization. While recognizing that the huge subsidies paid to many farmers in the European Union and the United States had a detrimental impact on world prices, an organization called Christian World Services does not see any evidence that the solutions offered to date will meet the desperate needs of the world’s poorest people. Instead they are campaigning for international trade rules and practices that ensure that all people have enough food to meet their daily needs. Christian World Services goes further by encouraging people to learn from some of our long term partners working this area.

Groups with a solid record of addressing poverty like Monlar (acronym for Movement for National Land Agricultural Reform) based in rural Sri Lanka have organized a sophisticated response that both challenges the World Bank’s involvement in their country’s economy and helps the poorest people develop better and more reliable food sources. Home gardens using organic and sustainable techniques are the cornerstone of local solutions. Monlar is also a key player in national global struggles for a different view of economics that puts people living in their environment at its heart and ensures they have reliable access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food as well as control over how it is produced, distributed and consumed. In short: food sovereignty.

Groups like Christian World Services, Monlar, the Canadian Food Grains bank and work done by United Church partners call us to hear the words written in the passage from Deuteronomy. The words remind us that God’s people care for the poor and vulnerable because the earth is God’s good gift to be used for all of God’s children. “Remember when you were slaves in the land of Egypt”. The people of Israel are called to remember the time when they were hungry and oppressed, to remember what that felt like and to share what they were growing and harvesting. Their story is our story.

The words of the Psalm call us to live in right relationship and to me that means loving God and loving neighbors as we love ourselves, the words we heard from the gospel.

I would like to share words with you written by Gary Kenny, Africa Area Relations (southern Africa), of the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit. These words were used at a Church House worship service. They are titled *A Place at the Table*.

In fields at home and in lands faraway,
The once tender shoots of spring are transformed into food
for the harvest-wheat on Canadian Prairies, teff in the highlands
of Ethiopia, quinoa in Peru's altaplano, rice in the paddies of the
Philippines.
The earth gives up its bounty so that all may eat and be nourished.
But in the midst of plenty, there is scarcity; many of God's
Children cry out for food and are hungry.
Let our ears be open to their cries.
Sandwiches and cups of coffee will not satisfy the needs of the
urban poor, nor will shipments of food grains end the poverty
and hunger of people the world over.
Succor for the poor is important. It is the sign of a generous
and caring neighbor. Still God calls us to do more.
To be secure in food is not merely to know someone will give
you food, but to have the means to grow your own food and to
feed yourself.
Our mission is to share the fruits of our own land, but also to ask
the question: "Why in the midst of plenty are people without
food?"
It is the structures and patterns of relating, built up and calcified
over many generations, that contributes to poverty and food
insecurity.
Food for all must be more than a slogan. All people must have
security in food. All must have dignity in life.
Our task is twofold: to give generously and to seek justice. Charity
alone offers crumbs from the table; justice offers a place at the table.

Now one final story to illustrate these words and the message in our scripture readings today: MEET SOCCORO

In Nicaragua 80% of the people live in poverty. One woman, Socorro, live in a very dilapidated rural community named Buenos Aires. The houses in her community are little more than shacks made from odd bits of wood and have no electricity. The road to the community is deeply rutted and uneven, very windy and unsealed and the settlement is situated in one of the drier areas of the countryside. When Liz Martyn from Christian World Service visited it earlier this year she reported that the people themselves looked poorer than in other communities and their faces looked tired and drained with the daily struggle of survival.

Socorro has two boys and two girls, one of whom is adopted. Her daughter has a child who was born with a brain injury. Her son also has a disability due to brain injury. Her husband Hilario Sanchez used to work as a security guard at the US embassy but now unemployed and looking for casual work. The day Liz met him he was going to sell Cajeta de Leche (a candy made from milk and sugar) on the streets of the Capital City of Managua. Socorro made the candy using milk from her father's cows. They live on his land.

But Socorro has found real hope. She is beginning to plant fruit and shade trees with the help of Christian World Services partner CEPAD (a Christian non-profit, non partisan association of social concerns). She has planted 100 fruit trees including 52 mango trees. To irrigate the trees she waters each plant with a bucket of water, filling a plastic soft drink bottle that feeds each seedling. There is a small hole in the cap, enabling the water to drip down slowly to the roots rather than evaporate in the hot sun. They have a well but it dries up as the river dries up. Big farmers further up the river are building small dams and retaining walls to collect water, depriving the poorer people down river of the water they so desperately need. In Nicaragua they don't have spring but instead a rainy season in September/October. Socorro planned to dig a ditch around her garden in preparation for the rain that she needs so that it will help her new seedlings to thrive.

She told Liz, "Our dreams are coming true. We have a saying in Nicaragua, 'When the country is small, the dreams are bigger'." Socorro will sell the fruit in order to have money to buy the things she knows the children need. CEPAD has developed this program to help people like Socorro who have few other means of income. For Socorro the patio garden means that she will no longer have to depend on the erratic assistance from people outside her community but instead find her own source of income that will provide for the whole family.

The benefits won't be immediate. It will take 3 – 4 years for the trees to produce so in the meantime she will continue to work as a domestic to buy food for her family, making some candy to sell in the neighborhood from time to time.

Before Liz left she asked Socorro if there was anything she wanted to say to people who don't know much about CEPAD and Nicaragua. She responded, "I would like to thank god for the opportunity to work on this program and thank the women of CEPAD for organizing this work and the people who support it. I am very proud to have this project and your visit just encourages me more.

I have mentioned several organizations today who are working to eliminate world hunger. I invite, challenge all of us as church to learn more about these organizations, to learn who are neighbors really are, and to become involved somehow, to live in right relationship, to change those 800 million plus stories of hunger to stories of hope and success at eliminating world hunger. Amen!