

**“Food Riot Prevented”
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Last week the Bishops at the Lambeth Conference walked in support of the MDG’s (Last time they were advocating debt relief for developing countries.)

Though many believe the church ought not to meddle in politics, in the gospel passage for today, Jesus makes quite a different point: “You give them something to eat.” And then he shows them the economics of the kingdom.

These are diametrically opposed to the economics of empire with which we have become painfully aware of late. Let me explain what I mean. Suppose Jesus had continued the miraculous feeding over a period of time. It would of course have had the unintended consequence of putting the bakers and fisherman and farmers in the surrounding towns out of business. How could they compete with such a farm subsidy, free food every day? But then when they had all left their nets and fields and headed for the cities to find work in sweat shops, or come and joined him out in the desert, or become brigands and bandits to feed their families, suppose he announced one day, or rather asked Peter to announce, that the freebies were over and the price of the daily bread and fishes distribution would be now be set based on the free market.

This is what’s happening in our own day. With price supports for US commodities like corn and rice, small farmers all over the world, not to mention those in the US, have been driven out of business or driven off their land. Small farmers in Haiti, once among the strongest rice producing exporters in the world, can no longer support their families, schools and small towns. So-called food riots broke out in Haiti in the Spring. Mexican peasants are starving or fleeing into the US in the face of biofuel supports and the rising cost of oil that is rendering maize out of reach. India, where increasing numbers of small farmers are committing suicide in the face of the shame of not being able to support their families, walked out of the recent WTO talks shutting-down the entire negotiating process when the the price ceilings they demanded were set impossibly high.

And that was happening in Jesus’ day, as well, where the farms of peasants, hopelessly in debt, were being foreclosed by wealthy absentee landlords, the agribusiness of its Roman Empire. Surrounded by the desperation, and frustration of the starving poor, Jesus proclaims a counter empire, the empire of God, and shows them a counter economics.

When the disciples come to him urgently suggesting that this potentially riotous crowd be sent away so they can buy food for themselves in the surrounding towns, he tells them to give them something to eat. And then he asks what they have. They report back, “five loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many.” Then, by telling them to sit down in groups, he appeals to a story they all would have known. You remember the Old Testament story of Gideon the reluctant judge who faced with an occupying force of more than 300 thousand Midianites, called together the 3,000 able bodied men of Israel to take back their land. But God told him that if they should be victorious with such a force, they would give themselves credit and turn away from

God. So he told Gideon to send away everyone who was afraid, or had been married in the last year, or who just didn't want to fight. Even then there were too many, so he weeded more out until the remaining force to face the enemy was reduced to but 300 men. The fact that in the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding the specific number of 5000 plus women and children is mentioned and that they are commanded in one version to sit down in groups of 50, approximately ten groups for each of the twelve disciples, was based on the fifty to one ratio of Gideon. That would not have been lost on the early hearers of this story.

It would have underscored the point that God's abundance can overwhelm the spiritual oppression of the economic scarcity we live in the midst of. But this is true only if we take our eucharistic worship seriously and carry out in the rest of our lives the command of Jesus to the disciples, "you give them something to eat." The eucharist builds in us the pattern of the action of Jesus at this feeding. With him we take, bless, break, and give. We take stock of our resources. We do this weekly at the offertory, at the collection, where a symbolic token of our substance, of our wherewithal, the fruit of our labor, the produce of our dreams, is offered in both forms of bread. We do this annually as we take stock of our assets and income dedicating a portion of it to God through our annual stewardship pledge. And when we look we often say with the disciple to Jesus, "what is so little among so many?" And yet, like the little boy in John's version who offers his entire lunch, we hand it over without strings or conditions, trusting Jesus to bless it. Blessing is, of course, not a matter of adding something not yet there but of acknowledging the goodness of the gift and the goodness of the giver. It is always an opportunity to praise God the giver for his goodness in giving and the goodness of all creation. And especially for the ministry of Jesus himself who like our offerings and the bread on the table was broken so that out of him might flow the water of life, the forgiveness and love that buoys our lives above the undertow of fear and greed that rules the empires of the world.

And just as in the feeding miracle, in the Eucharist the disciples are given the baskets of bread to give to the hungry people. The abundance of God is not to be hidden or hoarded, not to be relegated to irrelevant sermons or high-brow music, but it is called for, demanded really, by the One who will judge the world at the end of time, to be distributed justly to everyone in need whether friend or foe, without reference to race, religion, or ethnic origin. And just so the Bishops and the worldwide Anglican Church, whatever may appear to divide it, are united in responding to the Lord's command: "You give them something to eat."