

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I rather doubt that any biblical passage, other than John 3:16, has been more influential throughout the centuries than the powerful story in Matthew 25: 31-40. Just imagine how many food drives, homeless shelters, orphanages, nursing homes, hospitals, medical clinics and ministries of mercy have been launched out of response to these words. Jesus' words in Matthew 25 have shaped every Christian congregation and institution in profound ways.

Perhaps it is good to read the words again, maybe several times, reflecting on the meaning: Jesus says:

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.* (Notice we will separate into one of two groups, but how will this be determined? Christian and non-Christian, Protestant and Catholic, Norwegians and everyone else?) Read on.

*Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

*Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and go to visit you?'*

*The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever*

*you do for one of the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you did it for me. Absorb the power and the impact of this reply, 'Whatever you do, whatever you do for the least of these my sisters and brothers, Jesus says, 'you do it for me.' Whatever we do for the poor, the marginalized, the refugees, the hungry, the oppressed, the sick, the imprisoned, we do it for Jesus. Talk about motivation.*

Just over a year ago Lutheran Church of Hope responded to this biblical challenge, especially the part of giving the hungry something to eat, by joining together in a gigantic effort called "Feed A Million in 40 Days." However, as Hopesters so often do, the congregation shot right through the goal and ended up preparing more than 1.6 million meals, with most of the food going to the country of Haiti.

All of this was a powerful witness to Jesus call to feed the hungry, but also to the impact that a large group of people can have on the tragic dilemma of hunger and deprivation. It is not the only answer, but it is one way to respond and make a difference.

Needless to say, with all of the media coverage of the campaign and with the kind of buzz created within Lutheran Church of Hope, it was certainly overheard rather widely throughout Des Moines and Iowa. Many people contacted Pastor Pat Quaid and others saying they wanted to join this kind of an effort to feed the hungry. Thus a steering group was formed made up of some leaders from Hope as well as people from a wide spectrum of church and community life in Des Moines. Together they decided that they would lead a much wider effort at feeding the hungry at the end of the summer in 2008.

This whole enterprise was to be called "Meals From The Heartland," and the goal was three times Hope's original goal, namely to prepare three million meals. Most of this food would be distributed in

some of the poorest nations in the world; El Salvador, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and Nicaragua.

A huge gift to the planning came when Global Spectrum volunteered to open up, Hy-Vee Hall, its expansive facility for the preparation of the meals. With this incredible space available, now it was possible to construct 115 work stations for the actual food packaging, accommodating over 1100 volunteers at one time. Many times during the five days, all of the stations were full to overflowing, in all more than 12,000 people came to help.

Such an effort also needs financial resources as well as volunteers, as each meal which is prepared costs approximately 14 cents. This means three million meals would need to raise \$420,000. Thankfully, more than forty businesses in the greater Des Moines area provided both financial support as well as allowing their employees to participate in the food preparation (they are listed on the website [www.MealsFromTheHeartland.org](http://www.MealsFromTheHeartland.org)).

In addition to preparing meals, most of the participants also brought along an item of food for the Food Bank of Iowa, more than 9000 items were donated. Also donated were school supplies for "Backpack Buddies" a program sponsored by Embrace Iowa, a local non-profit created to support flood victims.

Many of the children also wrote letters to the children who would be receiving the food, expressing their compassion and love and hope for these children. What a great lesson for children to learn at an early age, learn the tragic facts that one child dies every five seconds in the world from hunger-related illnesses. But they also learn that we are not helpless in the face of this disaster, there is something we can do to help.

I heard someone say today that we could cut the deaths in half among the poor and children of the world if they just had access to clean water. Just think about that, fifty per cent of the premature deaths could be prevented with clean water. This makes our "well" project of this past Lent even more vital.

Who showed up to prepare the food? A very widely diverse group. Thousands of people came from the churches of Des Moines and beyond. Groups of all sorts came together: small groups from churches, football and soccer teams, work groups, school classes, etc. There were large groups of young children as well as many senior citizens, and everyone else in between.

The amazing news that came on Sunday evening was that once again we went way beyond the goal, the miracle goal, the one that most thought was far too audacious. The final numbers found that we had prepared more than four million meals. Just imagine, four million poor and impoverished people will now be given a very nutritious and life-giving meal.

Of course this campaign begs the question, why doesn't the entire Christian community join this effort, why doesn't the whole religious community participate, why doesn't the whole nation of America that is so filled with affluence and resources. Why do we not all join this crusade. If 12,000 people in Des Moines can feed 4,000,000 people, how many people could the whole Christian church feed around the world?

What if we took seriously these words of Jesus, *Whatever you do, whatever you do for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you do it for me.* What if we saw that this is something we are doing for Jesus, who gave the ultimate gift to us, his life, and our salvation? If we truly responded to these words, would it be possible to even eliminate hunger in the world. Remember, with God all things are possible.

Pastor Pat Quaid says we are going to do this again. We hope that this becomes a part of the DNA of Iowa, that after the State Fair is finished, and before most of the fall activities have kicked off, everyone will pause for a few days around the end of August to help feed the hungry of the world and of Des Moines, and to provide resources for children going back to school.

What better way to end the summer and begin a new school year.