

# Sandra Miller: Hunger

Seekers Church

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Sandra Miller

## Hunger

We are in the midst of our Thanksgiving season, and just a few weeks away from that all-American holiday. Thanksgiving is a time when we celebrate the harvest and eat our fill and then some. Let us raise our collective voice and give thanks to our Creator for the abundance in our lives. "Thanks be to God."

Thanksgiving is both an awkward and appropriate time to speak about world hunger. I was moved to address the topic today by an appeal from Bread for the World that invites the opening of our hearts to a problem that ultimately affects us all, especially if we want to live into our Christianity. In Isaiah 58, we are told to pour ourselves out for the hungry, and Luke verse 14 tells us to invite the poor to our dinner. What does this mean in 2004 at Seekers Church, where inviting the poor to share our table is not just frowned upon by our society, but can be a dangerous proposition? What does this mean when someone like the late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, who tried to live out this call in his life, said:

*"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."*

With God's guidance, maybe I will somehow answer this question for myself and for some of you – perhaps a seed for some new action will be quietly sown.

Although, or maybe because I have done a considerable amount of reading about hunger lately, and saw the affects of hunger

first hand in Guatemala, when I sat down to write beyond this point I felt paralyzed. Where do I even start? What can I say that is not overwhelming? How can I express God's sorrow and God's hope around this difficult subject? Finally, I just had to start somewhere.

Hunger is one of the most common references in the Bible and I will cite them liberally, but hopefully not ponderously, as I try to make some sense of it all. Hunger is of both the body and the spirit. Indeed, hunger of the body leaves the sufferer feeling bereft of the divine. Conversely, an unacknowledged hunger for the divine can lead some to hunger of the body. The real problem is that hunger cannot be separated from poverty, and poverty cannot be separated from politics, and that is a large undertaking for one sermon. Gladys and Edgar Guitz of [Casa del Alfarero](#) in Guatemala brought this home to those of us that traveled there this summer when they talked of the eight kinds of poverty they had identified in their work with the people of the Guatemala City dump, which both [Marjory](#) and [I addressed](#) in our sermons when we returned. Thinking about the people we tried to serve, I now feel the pain of two Biblical passages. Proverbs 16:26 says:

*"The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on."*

This helps me understand why and how people who have no other options continue to toil away in such adverse circumstances; and how and why these same people are driven to eat discarded food of questionable origins and condition. That leads me to Job 30:3, which enables me to empathize with the some feel when the workday is done:

*"Haggard from want and hunger, they roamed the parched land in desperate wastelands at night."*

It sheds some light on the rampant alcohol and drug abuse

among the dump population from another culture and time. My struggle intensifies when I read God's words spoken through Isaiah 49:10:

*"They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them besides springs of water."*

It is true that Gladys, Edgar, and everyone at Casa works to make that true in this one place on the earth. Nevertheless, even at just this one place, in my more pessimistic moments, I wonder if those springs will spring forth.

The facts are that nearly one third of the District's population is food insecure, and one in five children here goes to bed hungry each night. Nationally thirty-six million people live in families that suffer food insecurity, eleven million are chronically hungry and one in five children lives in poverty. In developing countries over eight hundred thirty million people are hungry, thirty-one thousand children under the age of five die every day, and seven million die annually from hunger related causes. These numbers continue to rise, not diminish.

Why are so many hungry? When does the promise of Luke, 6:21 come true:

*"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."*

It is a myth that there is not enough food to go around. Anuradha Mittal, a political scientist and Food First activist states it simply:

*"Hunger is a social disease linked to poverty, and thus any discussion of hunger is incomplete without a discussion of economics...People are hungry because they are too poor to buy food. There is a shortage of purchasing power, not a shortage*

*of food."*

The sixties saw predictions of world population growth far outstripping the planet's ability to feed everyone. That brought about what has come to be called the Green Revolution – an increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides – in order to increase food production. (I will not even try to follow up here with what that has meant to world health.) Many countries also started population control programs, which resulted in a slow down of the predicted growth rates. Between 1970 and 1990, the total food available per person in the world rose by eleven percent. Does that sound good? In that same period the number of hungry people fell by more than one hundred fifty million. Does that sound even better? These are the statistics we heard our government and the big five agribusinesses crowing about. The factor they withheld was that one country skewed the statistics. China, which was largely responsible for its own increased food production and drop in population growth, when taken out of the equation makes the numbers come out rather differently. Between 1970 and 1990 the rest of the world population going hungry increased by sixty million, despite the dramatic rise in food production.

At the same time, the five principle companies that produced those chemicals started to concentrate corporate wealth. They bought up farmland and built transnational agribusinesses that now have control of all facets of worldwide food production from seed development and production through what gets grown where and by whom all the way to distribution. One of the obvious results of this consolidation of food power are the loss worldwide of family farms due to the inequity of farming costs versus crop revenue which results in unemployed urban swell and more hunger. Another result is a lack of native food plants for the rural working poor as farm land is turned over to plants grown for export to an international market rather than for the local population, which leads to slash and burn

of ecologically sensitive areas for local small plots and more hunger. For me that leads to a cry as from the Psalmist in 17:14:

*“O lord, by your hand save [us] from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life.”*

I admit I feel powerless in the face of corporate power.

Let me go backward and address what happened to the increased food produced by the Green Revolution. George McGovern, in his book *The Third Freedom*, says:

*“The world now produces a quantity of grain that, if distributed evenly, would provide everyone with 3500 calories per day, more than enough for an optimal diet. This does not even count vegetables, fruits, fish, meat, poultry, edible oils, nuts, root crops or dairy products. Despite the dire predictions that the world’s population would soon outstrip food production, it has been the other way around: food production has risen a full 16 percent above population growth.”*

This sounds like good news, doesn’t it? The problem lies in that catch phrase “if distributed evenly.” Just a few more citations of the bad news and I promise I will move on.

One third of the world’s eight-hundred-thirty-million hungry live in India. In the year 2000, there were nearly 60 million tons of surplus food grains that the government opted not to distribute to the poor. They hoped, instead, to sell it for export at a profit. When it did not sell, it was left to rot in the granaries. That is not the whole of it. It also stopped buying grain from its own farmers, leaving them destitute. The farmers, who had gone into debt to purchase expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the advice of the government, were now forced to burn their crops in their fields. That same

government was also buying grain from the transnationals because stipulations in their aid package required them to do so. That is still not the whole of it, but enough to illustrate the point.

India's situation is not unique. Some countries, like Indonesia have even harsher extenuating circumstances and excess food stores rotting. The last harsh example I will bring to the table is that of the famine in Ethiopia. We were horrified and haunted by the first media blitz of people with distended bellies we had ever seen, night after night on the news. The truth is that even then, some thirty years ago, there were stores of food left undistributed by the government as mothers and children died of hunger.

The hungry are poor and the poor have no power. They cannot act out God's message through Nehemiah, verse 9:15:

"In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them."

Yet, putting the land back in the hands of the people is a big part of the answer. This is where organizations like Bread for the World and Heifer Project International, UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries and the Presbyterian Hunger Program, with the support of those who resonate with their cause, hold hope.

Where is the good news? Here at Seekers the good news is in each of us – the call is to do what we can do. For some of us, that is putting money into the offering plate here at Seekers, knowing that the advocacy and local and international giving committees will make good use of our combined resources. For some of us it is also manifest in individual donations. For some of us it is in the work we do everyday for which we come to this community for support.

The good news is also in the men's group that meets at

Potter's House on Tuesday mornings is trying to get sponsors for a weekly feed the homeless breakfast program they want to start at the restaurant. So Others Might Eat, with locations across the city every day works at getting food to the needy. Martha's Table and other soup kitchens struggle to keep their doors open week after week. Hope and a Home reaches out to families without the resources to provide basic necessities for themselves. This weekend you may have come home to find that your local Boy Scout troop dropped off "Scouting for Food" bags on your doorstep to be collected on November 15th. Local fire stations, grocery stores and food banks will soon start collecting food for Thanksgiving baskets for the needy. On Thanksgiving Day Potter's House and a team of volunteers will contribute hours and food and will serve over 300 people, most of whom are working poor and/or homeless, just as is the case around the world.

Lest you think that I would leave this week's lectionary readings wholly untouched, I will start to end this sermon with some of the good news in the story of Naomi and Ruth, one of my favorites as a child. What I did not understand as a child was that hunger and famine drove Naomi to return to her people. I did not understand her abject loneliness, or her need to die in her own land. Because Naomi was a foreigner and a widow her adopted community would not have seen fit to share a little from their stores to provide for her until the famine ended, or give her solace in her grieving. Naomi was hungry in every sense of the word. Naomi did not count on Ruth's love and loyalty, and the story changes when they work to ease each other's hungers.

In this week's passage of the story of Ruth, we have moved to the happy ending that starts out on Boaz's threshing floor. However, before Naomi sent Ruth to lay with Boaz, she sent to her to his fields to glean. As Rabbi Arthur Waskow points out in his wonderful essay, "What if Ruth the Moabite Came to America Today?":

*“Although Boaz was generous-hearted, Ruth’s right to glean did not depend upon his generosity. It was the law.”*

God’s word in Leviticus 19:9-10 was clear:

*“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien.”*

In the ancient practice of leaving some for the poor and alien, there is a metaphorical and a literal small piece of contemporary good news. Metaphorically, I believe this calls us back to Luke asking us to invite the poor to our dinner. There is an invitation to find something of excess in our lives that we can allow another to glean from us. It may be a simple hello to the stranger on the street, or something more tangible. Literally, across the country, there is a growing network of remaining small family farms that allow gleaners to come after the harvest. Some of the gleaners are the actual recipients of the food, but in many cases, it is a new style of gleaning. It is an opportunity for diverse groups of people to come together, pay a small fee that covers transportation and lunch, and create new community while gleaning foods that they then donate to soup kitchens, and other food distribution centers. There are several D.C. area chapters going out seasonally.

So, how else do we pour ourselves out for the hungry? I remember that, in our own way, each of us is hungry, and each of us is a child of God. Lamentations 2:19:

*“Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to [God] for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street.”*

Reminds us, I think, to pour ourselves out in prayer. Remember



to hold those in prayer who cannot pray for themselves, and give thanks to God for the abundance in our lives, of which this community is no small part.

To honor that abundance I would like to read a poem I offered as a meditation for the School of Christian Living this semester. Max Coots, Minister Emeritus of the Canton, N.Y., Unitarian Universalist Church, wrote it.

*"A Prayer Of Thanksgiving "*

*Written by Max Coots*

*Minister Emeritus of the Canton, NY, Unitarian Universalist Church*

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*Let us give thanks...*

*For generous friends...with hearts as big as hubbards and smiles as bright as their blossoms;*

*For feisty friends as tart as apples;*

*For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers, keep reminding us we had them;*

*For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;*

*For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants and as elegant*

*as*

*a row of corn – and the others – as plain as potatoes, and so good*

*for*

*you.*

*For funny friends, who are as silly as brussels sprouts and as amusing*

*as Jerusalem artichokes, and serious friends as complex as  
cauliflowers  
and as intricate as onions;*

*For friends as unpretentious as cabbages, as subtle as summer  
squash,  
as  
persistent as parsley, as delightful as dill, as endless as  
zucchini,  
and who – like parsnips – can be counted on to see you  
through the  
long winter;*

*For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time,  
and  
young  
friends coming on as fast as radishes;*

*For loving friends, who wind around as like tendrils, and  
hold us  
despite our blights, wilts, and witherings;*

*And finally, for those friends now gone, like gardens past,  
that have  
been harvested – but who fed us in their times that we might  
have life  
thereafter;*

*For all these we give thanks.*

*Amen.*

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P.S. I thought I'd offer you a short list of ways each of us can help the hungry. It costs no money and takes just a few minutes every day.

Free donate food websites: