

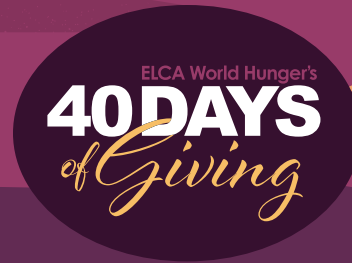


ELCA World Hunger
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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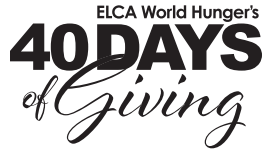


Lent 2021 STUDY

What Will It Take to End Hunger?



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God's work. Our hands.



WEEK 1 A Bigger "We"

NOTES

"Your Father who sees in secret will reward you"
(Matthew 6:4).

Almost eight years had passed since Marina set foot inside a church building. A car accident when she was in her late 40s had left her homebound with chronic pain and without use of her legs. One of her favorite visits in her home was on Sunday afternoon, when her pastor would come by to give Marina Holy Communion and pray with her. With a half flight of stairs leading up to the church door and more stairs between the foyer and the sanctuary, worshiping with her congregation was not an option.

That's why Marina was so surprised to get a call from her pastor in July 2020 asking her to be part of a conversation about reopening the building for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was quiet in that first Zoom meeting, listening to the other 10 people share their ideas and concerns. Some were scared, some weren't, but most were exasperated and at a loss. One man seemed to put it best when he said, "This is all new to us. We've just never had to think about what it would mean to not be in church together ever."

Before anyone could murmur agreement, Marina made her sole contribution to the discussion: "Whaddya mean 'we'?"

This "we" – or, more specifically, this call to reexamine "we" – is at the core of the gospel message for Ash Wednesday this year and, indeed, of the church's vision of a just world where all are fed.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21 is the starting point on the journey through Lent. In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes his audience about public, showy displays of spirituality. Rather than take pleasure or pride in giving alms, we are to hide the deed even from ourselves. Rather than pray in public, we



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think, share or journal about a time when you acted and it created a positive change. What did you do? What happened? What did it feel like?
2. Where have you seen God turning prayers into action?
3. Think about the prayers you share during worship. Bring one prayer to mind. How might your community turn this prayer into action? What small or large steps could you take?
4. Where is there a need for action to end hunger in your community? What will it take to move this action forward?

PRAYER

God of promise, God of hope, God of fullness, God of peace, guide us, your people, to be your hands and feet, to work together as you build on our rocky soil a new, just world where all are fed.

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are to retire to private rooms. Rather than display the effects of our fasting, Jesus tells us, “put oil on your head and wash your face” (6:17).

In fact, each of Jesus’ directives seems to contradict the very notion of what we have come to call “being a public church.” The sermon of Jesus appears to favor private spirituality over public displays of faith. He seems to suggest that faith is best lived out in the quiet and private spaces of our hearts rather than in public.

However, reading the sermon in this way misses the fact that the Gospel of Matthew is a call to be this very public church, which will “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). We might believe that the message of Lent is to practice private piety, yet Jesus focuses here not on the mere practices of faith but on the community of faith. In other words, Jesus is talking not about the what but about the who – who we are and who God is.

Michael Joseph Brown hints at this in his commentary on Matthew in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Fortress, 2007), noting the subtle assumptions about privilege in Matthew 6. Jesus’ command to the disciples to pray in their “room” (6:6) assumes they have a private room to retreat to, even though Jesus himself “has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). “Almsgiving,” as Brown writes, “assumes that you have something to give.” Even fasting assumes that one has the means to make choices about when to start and stop their own hunger.

Jesus’ message is a challenge to a privileged church to think more carefully about who they are. The problem isn’t that they are doing the wrong things. Giving alms to support neighbors is a good thing. Praying in the synagogue is, well, what is supposed to happen when the community is gathered. They are going through the right motions. But they have forgotten why they are doing them, and they have forgotten who they are. Their practices are no longer about the good of the community or the good of the neighbor but are mere performances, focused entirely on themselves.

Almsgiving, praying, fasting – these are practices meant to remind us of each other. But has being faithful become a matter of making sure we are seen rather than of training our hearts and minds to see each other? Marina’s fellow congregant in the Zoom call was more than willing to help the church with what it needed to do. But as her

question revealed, he had forgotten who the church is called to be. His “we” was no more than an “I.”

Yet even when the church forgets, God remembers. In each of the dictates to his followers, Jesus reminds them of the “Father who sees in secret.” He reminds us that God’s concern for us is not measured by our conspicuousness, nor is it limited by our narrow imagination.

Accompanying our neighbors in God’s work of building a just world where all are fed means reimagining who we are and who we are called to be. There are so many stories shared across this church about friends and neighbors addressing hunger and poverty together. But perhaps the significance of faith in God, who “sees in secret,” is best exemplified not by the stories we can tell but by the stories we can’t – stories of God at work “in secret” and in hidden ways. These are the stories we don’t hear, of neighbors whose names can’t be shared.

They include the story of the clinic that cannot be named because unjust laws would put its noncitizen clients at risk. They include the story of women in a shelter whose names must be hidden to keep the women safe from their abusers. They include the story of ministries in conflict zones whose details cannot be shared without exposing workers and guests to violence.

These are the stories that cannot be trumpeted but are nevertheless triumphant examples of the work of God, “who sees in secret.”

Ending hunger means seeing what unjust power tries to keep hidden. It means defining “we” in a way that threatens the principalities and powers – including our own privilege – that make everything about “I.” And it means remembering, when we are isolated or marginalized, that “I” am never excluded from God’s “we.”

Jesus’ call in the Gospel reading reminds us that being the church requires a definition of community that is more expansive, more diverse and, thus, more beautiful than the exclusive vision put forth by those in power.

In this study, we have read stories of people at work around the world. Their situations may differ, their needs may differ, but what unites them is the commitment to an active hope that refuses to stagnate or stay silent. It is the hope of the vulnerable guests seeking care at clinics and shelters, of women and girls in India, of advocates in Milwaukee and of peacemakers in Colombia.

It is the hope of Lent, which propels us on this arduous journey to – and beyond – the cross. This hope empowers us see a number such as 690 million hungry but to refuse to despair. It can be sustained only by our trust that God is with us in each small step, guiding us toward a promised future. In hope, we expand our vision of what it means to be “we.” In hope, we are honest about the challenges we face. In hope, we invest in our shared future. In hope, we speak up for justice.

And in hope, we act, knowing that a just world where all are fed is not just possible but promised – and knowing, too, that we are called to be part of building that future. This is not the idealistic prayer spoken but a realistic prayer lived in solidarity with one another in cities, towns, shelters, clinics, classrooms, gardens, statehouses – all the places where God is at work.

This is the prayer of an Easter people, and this is our prayer – that God will not merely turn stones into bread but build a new world on that rocky soil, a just world where all are fed.

2002. Today, social leaders remain at risk from paramilitary units over disputes involving land.

The peace process has been a long road for Colombia, and IELCO has been traveling it for many years. In San José, former combatants and their families are given a chance to start again through the work of the church. In San José de León, they are able to build and maintain homes and resume their former lives raising fish, pigs and chickens. It's a chance to rebuild some of what was lost in the years of conflict.

Addressing conflict and working for peace are central to ending hunger. Conflict is one of the most significant reasons for hunger increasing around the world. When people's lives are threatened, they do not feel safe going to work or staying home. Many are forced to migrate to protect their families. Land may be stolen or destroyed, and markets are closed or empty. Parents and workers may be injured or killed in the violence. The United Nations estimates that up to 80% of humanitarian needs around the world are caused by conflict.

Building peace is a critical step in ending hunger. But it is a difficult step to take.

Carolina has learned this through her work with IELCO. "There are people who believe that you can close your eyes and yearn for peace without making an effort towards it," she says. "What God allowed me to know is very different from that idealism, the reality I could observe and live, expressing hope in all the people who are part of this change." The idealistic belief that peace means simply transforming swords into plowshares ignores "the struggle against negative feelings associated with the traumatic experiences" of the people with whom Carolina works. Yet together they "walk towards the goal of peace and reconciliation.

"They are working together, united, to show the country and the world that this is the way to fight for peace."

We know that we cannot merely declare or call for "Peace, peace," when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). Building peace and ending hunger take action within community and are fostered by the hope and trust that, with each step, God is moving our world closer to that goal.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think, journal or share about a time when you felt left out or unable to speak because of fear. How does that memory impact your reflection on this reading and devotion?
2. The members of Marina's church were unable to see that their ability to climb stairs gave them the privilege to gather together in one space. The members of the ancient church to which Jesus was speaking were unable to see that their ability to give alms, fast and pray in private rooms was a privilege. What are some ways that privilege might affect who feels included in your community?
3. What does your church community look like? In what ways are all neighbors in your community invited to share their experience and ideas openly and freely with your congregation?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, you bring light and life for all the world. Help us to listen, learn and love until your light and life fill every community. Amen.

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“For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide [God’s] face from me, but heard when I cried” (Psalm 22:24).

When Kamini Dhurvey was just a child, her mother died and her father remarried. Her stepmother abused Kamini, and her father did not step in to protect her from his new wife. Unprotected and unsafe, Kamini left home when she was older and eventually found a place to rent and a job in a small shop.

Even out on her own, she did not feel safe. Kamini feared that the landlord who owned her residence would hurt her. The security she tried to find in leaving home eluded her. Through a door-to-door survey, Kamini learned about Naari Shakti, a project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Madhya Pradesh in India supported in part by ELCA World Hunger. Naari Shakti works for gender equality through advocacy for women’s rights, provides training in tailoring and computer skills, and offers emergency medical support to girls and women in vulnerable situations. The project also provides housing assistance and psychosocial support to those who need it.

At the Naari Shakti project office, Kamini found a safe space to tell her story and people who would welcome her. With counseling and support from the project, she was able to leave the place she was renting and move into a hostel for girls. The project later arranged for Kamini to stay in a women’s rehabilitation center, where she is living and pursuing her studies.

Before Kamini moved to the rehabilitation center, project staff tried to contact her father. But her father told the staff that he no longer wanted anything to do with her and that it was up to her to live her life as she wanted. She was no longer welcome in her father’s home. With

Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others.

Pray. Then act.

These past 40 days of Lent commemorate the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting and facing down temptation. In the first temptation, Satan placed the “famished” Jesus before a pile of stones and demanded that Jesus prove his power by turning the stones to bread that would end his hunger (Matthew 4:1-3). How tempting that must have been! How many parents with not enough food for their children would wish for such a miracle so that their family might be fed? How many of the 690 million undernourished people around the world would welcome the power to turn stones into the bread they need?

Yet the choice Jesus faced was not between stones and bread but between truth and lies. No sudden miracle will end the world’s hunger. Ending hunger is not about wishing or praying for the power to alter reality. Hunger does not end because of a miraculous intervention. It ends because of the persistent work of God with, among and through people striving for change. It is sometimes slow work, accomplished one step at a time. But it will not stop until we realize that vision of a time when we will hunger and thirst no more.

Carolina Camargo, a nurse from Villavicencio, Colombia, knows that this is what it will take. Carolina is part of the work God is doing through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Colombia (IELCO) and the church’s Justicia y vida (Justice and Life) initiative, which is supported by ELCA World Hunger. Together with others, Carolina works toward future reconciliation in Justicia y vida’s “From War to Peace” project, which weaves ties of solidarity between the church and communities in Colombia that have been beset by violence for many years.

Carolina and other volunteers are at work in the area of Urabá, which means “promised land” in the Indigenous Embera Katío language. Since the 1990s, Urabá has witnessed a war involving the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), insurgents, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and paramilitary groups. The conflict led to more than 103 massacres in the region and 32,000 people displaced between 1998 and

*“They are working together, united,
to show the country and the world
that this is the way to fight for peace.”*

Thus far this Lent, we have heard stories of God working through this church, our companions and our neighbors to end hunger. We have heard stories from India, Wisconsin and Washington, D.C., and heard of the stories that cannot be shared. We have learned that ending hunger means committing ourselves to a more inclusive vision of community, to honesty, to justice and to one another. Here, in this last week, companions from Colombia will help teach us about the final tool: action.

As much progress as the world has made to end hunger, we still have a long way to go. Nearly 690 million people around the world are undernourished, and more than 35 million people in the United States don't know where their next meal will come from. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of hunger around the world was on the rise after a decade of decline. With the pandemic, we have seen historic levels of unemployment, and even the most conservative forecasts warn that hunger and poverty could increase with nearly unprecedented rapidity in the coming years as we recover from its effects.

In his response to the plague that reemerged in Wittenberg in 1527, Martin Luther addressed the question of how a Christian is to act in a pandemic. After highlighting the ways God shows concern for good health in Scripture and exhorting his readers to care for their neighbors, Luther writes that prayer, though important, is not enough. Christians, he proclaims, must do more than pray. They must act.

nowhere else to go, Kamini has found a home at the center. The Naari Shakti program provides her a safe place to live, books and additional support for her education.

Around the world, 690 million people face hunger, and each of them has a story to tell. Hunger is rarely just a matter of lacking food. Rather, it is often a pernicious and persistent symptom of much deeper pain, of much deeper need. Unfortunately, stories like Kamini's are not uncommon. For women and girls around the world, abuse, violence and inequality lie behind the higher rates of hunger they face. Globally, women are 13% more likely than men to experience food insecurity and almost 27% more likely to be severely food insecure. They are also more likely to be victimized by violence, more likely to do work with little or no pay, and less likely to have access to credit to start a home or business.

If we are going to end hunger, we have to start by being honest about the stories of pain, exploitation, injustice and violence that lie behind it. We must start with honesty about what hunger is and what it is not.

Hunger is not accidental. It is the result of inequality, marginalization and injustice that inhibit one's ability to access the resources one needs to live.

Hunger is not merely the physical sensation of going without food. It is an insidious reality that affects the whole person – physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially.

Hunger is not merely a calculation of calories. It is a measure of the extent to which a person is constrained in the pursuit of their own well-being.

Ending hunger means being willing to enter into the sometimes painful stories of neighbors in need. It requires that we accompany one another down difficult roads with honesty about what we may find.

Lent commemorates Jesus' journey to the cross and thus demands of us honesty about the death-dealing pervasiveness of sin that would crucify truth in order to silence it. This makes Lent an appropriate season to consider what it will take to arrive at the vision of a just world where all are fed. Lent, after all, is about honesty. In this season, we are called to be honest about the depths of our sin, including the

many ways that we, as the church, have fallen short in meeting the needs of our neighbors. Lent is about being honest with ourselves and with others about the depth of need in our world.

And Lent is also a season to be honest about the God who calls to us. In the psalm for this second week in Lent, the psalmist rejoices that God “did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted ... [nor] hide [God’s] face from me, but heard when I cried” (Psalm 22:24). In the Gospel story of Jesus’ transfiguration, we hear the voice of God echo over the mountain: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7).

The honesty to which we are called compels us to confront the pain of the world with a vision to transform it. Both the pain of the world and the vision to transform it are clear in the stories of Kamini’s life and the Naari Shakti project. It is the difference between the father who rejects her and the God who welcomes her. To know ourselves as claimed, named and welcomed by God is an act of truth-telling about who we really are – and how much that may differ from who the world thinks we can be. Abuse and rejection are part of Kamini’s story, and accompanying her means being honest about that. But they aren’t the whole of her story, and accompanying her means being honest about that too.

The honesty formed by faith compels us to tell the truth about hunger – and the truth about the God who promises its end. God’s promise of a just world where all are fed pulls us into the world to confront sin in all its forms, refusing to hide from affliction and yet refusing to let affliction be the end of the story for ourselves, our neighbors or our world. It is the honesty of an Easter people, who can deny neither the reality of the cross nor the reality of the empty tomb. To end hunger, we will need to be honest with ourselves about both.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think, share or journal about a time when someone showed you kindness and mercy. What was that like? How did it feel?
2. Think, share or journal about a time when someone used their time, skills and/or talents to invest in your growth. What was that like? How did it feel?
3. Now compare and contrast these two experiences – one of kindness and mercy, and one of investment. How are they different? Which experience made a more lasting impact, and why?
4. Does your community take time to invest in the long-term growth of its neighbors? How so? If not, how might your community begin investing in others? What might that look like?
5. Where is there a need for the kind of investment that can end hunger in your community?

PRAYER

Covenant God, since ancient times you have led and fed your people through many wilderness journeys. In this time, give us strength to invest your gifts in our neighbors and communities, that all might be fed. Amen.

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The first cooperative incubated by Luther Place was Dulce Hogar, a cooperative of women who provide cleaning services for homes and businesses. Together, the women learned how to run a business, pursue just employment and develop their own skills as leaders. As one participant describes it, “The vision of the cooperative is that all eight of us are well-paid and well-trained, and that we get to invest money in our families and in our community.”

The members of the cooperative were even paid for the times they spent in meetings and trainings. They learned together that their time and labor had value far exceeding the wages they had been offered before. And now, with an investment in them, they will be able to invest in others.

Projects such as the Beloved Community Incubator offer a counter-witness to the policies and practices of disinvestment that have created communities with high rates of poverty and food insecurity across the United States. These policies and practices are rooted in the misperception that some communities are worth investing in and others are not. But the residents of Logan Circle know that, despite the challenges they face, their community is worth the investment and a better future is worth pursuing.

We know this, too, by faith. Every community is blessed by God with assets and strengths, even as the people face barriers to using or developing those assets. And we know by faith that the future we pursue together is a shared endeavor. The future God has promised is a future for us and our neighbors. We will get there together, or we will not get there at all.

To end hunger is to recognize that responding to need is a matter not of merciful intervention but of investing in a shared future and trusting that the work of God toward that end will be revealed in those very communities that the profit-driven economy so often leaves behind. If we are going to end hunger, we need to invest in one another by sharing resources, listening to each other and building the relationships that will ensure the justice God has promised.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How have you experienced or felt God sustaining your strength in challenging circumstances?
2. What are some things you hunger for other than food (such as companionship, love and acceptance, or justice, clean air and water)? Does your community provide these things? How might you and your community better provide things that feed people in mind, body and spirit?
3. In the Naari Shakti project, Kamini found the resources she needed to develop her strengths and make meaningful choices for herself and her future. How does your church create opportunities for neighbors to develop their strengths and make meaningful choices for themselves and your community?
4. What kind of honesty will it take to end hunger in your community? Where is there a need for truth-telling and truth-seeking when it comes to the challenges you and your neighbors face?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, through the power of the cross and the glory of the empty tomb, you bring us the truth of your love for us and for all people. Help us to live into that truth and to share it with the world. Amen.

NOTES

WEEK 3

Justice

“The direct service of providing filter pitchers and the organizing work of bringing demands to our alderpersons, health department and mayor all lead us back to the font, where we stand with people at the holy water that makes us God’s children and sends us out to serve God’s justice.”

If we don’t listen carefully to Jesus’ words, we might think of him as meek and mild-mannered, the patient and perfect willing sacrifice, who admonishes his followers to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. Some might even think we are called to be docile and, at times, subservient. In many forms of American Christianity, believers are encouraged to acquiesce to their circumstances, to accept their lot in life with, if not good cheer, at least indifference. In fact, for some Christians, protest or rage must be reserved only to chastise “sinners” for their “immoral” ways.

If there is a story from the Gospels that challenges this picture of Jesus and Jesus’ followers, it may be the story from this week’s reading of Jesus clearing the temple in Jerusalem. The man who would stand reserved before Pilate here is described by the author of John’s Gospel as angry, wielding a whip and overturning tables. Clearly, even for the normally peaceful Son of God, there are some things that are too much to bear in silence.

The temple was the center of worship for the community in Jesus’ time. Here, the faithful would gather for holy days, as Jesus did in the story, or to offer the required sacrifices. The temple was also a center of commerce, with merchants selling wares to travelers outside the court. Because Roman money bore the likenesses of Roman leaders, it could not be used in the temple and needed to be exchanged to pay the temple tax, a fee assessed on all who entered.

The exodus begins in Egypt, where God’s people are enslaved and oppressed. God seeks out Moses to lead the people, lays low the unjust Pharaoh and accompanies the people across the wilderness for generations, providing food, water and safety along the way, even when the going is tough and the relationship between the people and God is complicated.

Simply put, God is invested in this community. God has a vested interest in its future. The covenant inaugurated between them leaves both parties vulnerable to the other. By leading them from Egypt and entering into a covenant with them, God has tied their futures together. God has a plan and has invested much to ensure that the people are part of it. This people, this nation, is God’s future. The provisions God grants are not mere merciful gifts but further investments toward a shared future for God and the people that will become Israel.

Now, of course, the church is not God; we are spiritual descendants of the wandering Hebrews, dependent still on God’s promise of this future. Yet, perhaps there is something we can learn here about what it means to pursue a promise.

People often view the church’s work to end hunger in light of the virtues of mercy and grace. Food, clothing, shelter and donations might be interpreted as mercies showered on suffering people or as gifts given to neighbors in need. But the reality is that our response to hunger goes beyond a desire to meet immediate needs. Our response to hunger is nothing less than an investment in that shared future articulated in the tagline for ELCA World Hunger: a just world where all are fed.

What difference might it make for the hunger ministries of this church to see the work we do together as an investment in this vision?

In Washington, D.C., the Beloved Community Incubator is based on the idea of investing in the people and in the Logan Circle neighborhood. The project began with a listening campaign by Luther Place Memorial Church, with support from ELCA World Hunger. In this campaign, residents of the community expressed their desire for cooperatives that would allow them to use their skills and talents to build wealth and income that would stay in the community.

*"[The vision is] that we get to invest money
in our families and in our community."*

The first reading for this fourth week of Lent is from the book of Numbers. The people have been on their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land for years, and the goal is nigh. They have received the law from God through Moses at Sinai and are now on the final leg of their journey. Yet, rather than be hopeful and eager, they are tempted by impatience (Numbers 21:4) and dissatisfied with the leadership of Moses and even their "miserable food" (Numbers 21:5). The exodus they thought would bring them to a new land has instead been a seemingly interminable journey in the wilderness. God's response is swift and harsh: "poisonous serpents" sent by God "bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (21:6). The people repent, Moses prays and God grants Moses a staff that will provide healing to all who are bitten.

It's not the kindest of stories. The psalmist gives it a different sort of spin, omitting any mention of the venomous snakes and lifting up the healing of God, who heard the cries of the people and "saved them from their distress" (Psalm 107:19b).

Despite the psalmist's sanitized take on the story, this pattern can be found throughout the story of the exodus. God rescues the people, they succumb to temptation, they repent, God shows mercy. Over and over and over.

These biblical narratives are often used to extol the merciful nature of God, who repeatedly forgives the people despite their sin. Truly, God does show mercy. But perhaps mercy is not the only lesson to be learned from the story of the people's walk with God.

There is some debate about the fairness of the moneychangers. While some writers claim the moneychangers were greedy or predatory, others note that, in general, the moneychangers at the temple dealt fairly with their customers. In any event, they were a necessary fixture at the temple, as were the merchants selling animals for sacrifice. Wealthy Jews would purchase sheep or cattle whereas working-class or poor Jews would opt for cheaper animals, such as doves.

To say that the system was necessary is not to say that it was fair. Even if the moneychangers did not engage in outright exploitation, the temple tax was especially felt by people living in poverty, for whom even a half shekel would have been more than they could afford. When added to the cost of sacrificial animals, the financial burden for people in poverty was high.

What drove Jesus to fashion a whip and erupt in anger was not the mere presence of commerce – after all, both the tax and the animals were necessary – but the unequal burden borne by the very people for whom the temple should have been caring. What inspired Jesus' rage was not the temple or trade but the way these two systems combined to leave people in need at a disadvantage, day in and day out. This injustice is simply too much for anyone to remain docile. Docility in the face of injustice is complicity.

Still today, an unequal burden continues to be fostered by systems and structures that leave many communities bearing the marks of injustice – sometimes in the very bodies of the people.

We've known for decades the dangers associated with lead, a metal that for many years was used in plumbing and paint. This hazardous metal can cause severe, long-term effects, including stunted brain development, anemia and kidney damage. As older pipes corrode, lead can seep into drinking water, and particles from paint in older homes can be inhaled. It can become part of the very water we drink and the air that we breathe, making it hard to keep adults and children safe.

Over the last decade, lead contamination has been found in water systems in Flint, Michigan, Newark, Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago and many other cities, both large and small. It has been found in homes, hospitals and schools and has been recognized as a national problem across the United States.

But that is not to say that the burdens of unsafe water are shouldered equally by all communities. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have found, African American children are nearly three times as likely as white children to be exposed to lead. Some studies have found the prevalence of lead poisoning in some Black and Latino neighborhoods to be as high as 90%, which means that as many as nine in 10 children have tested positive. Children living in poverty are also at higher risk, with higher rates of exposure and fewer means to address lead poisoning to prevent long-term consequences. This can create a vicious cycle. Families living in hunger and poverty are more vulnerable to environmental risks that can lead to high health care costs, illnesses that keep adults home from work, and developmental delays that can inhibit children's education – the very stressors that contribute to long-term, generational hunger down the road.

At Hephatha Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wis., a city with high rates of both poverty and lead exposure, leaders are working hard to keep children safe. The church, with support from ELCA World Hunger, provides lead-free kits with water filters, tape and mops. The tape can cover lead paint that is chipping, and the mops clean up dust from the paint so that children don't inhale it. The church also helps adults learn about the dangers of lead.

But filters, tape and mops can go only so far. The issue of lead – and the crisis of unsafe water, more generally – is an issue of justice. Environmental policies, housing regulations and health care access are all woven together when it comes to keeping people safe from lead poisoning. That's why Hephatha also worked with neighbors to start an advocacy group to talk with legislators about keeping the community safe. At a deeper level, access to clean water is not just a matter of what comes out of our taps but what goes into our laws. It's about the community we live in and not just the water we drink.

Pastor Mary Martha of Hephatha links this work to the calling of the church. Advocacy and education “[lead] us back to the font, where we stand with people at the holy water that makes us God's children and sends us out to serve God's justice.”

In the Gospel reading, Jesus recognizes the necessity of institutions such as the temple and commerce. But he also believes these same institutions should be held accountable for how people in need experience them. In Milwaukee, God is at work through a community

driven by hope that things can change – and guided by the wisdom that what we need is not just clean water but justice.

As we continue in our Lenten journey, learning about the tools we will need to share in God's work of ending hunger, the story of God at work in Milwaukee reminds us that the future we seek is a world where “justice will roll down like waters” – clean, safe, lead-free and life-giving waters accessible to all.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think, share or journal about a time when you felt that something was unfair or that you were at a disadvantage. How did you react? What did you do to try and change the situation? What powers resisted attempts at change?
2. Jesus' display of anger in the temple is often categorized as righteous anger or anger over mistreatment, insult or the malice of another. When can anger or even rage be a productive emotion?
3. How can you identify anger that is helpful and not harmful? How can you use anger in a productive way, to help your neighbors in need?
4. Where is there a need for justice in your community? What will a “just world” look like in your neighborhood?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, at the font you wash us in water and the word, and name us all your beloved children. With that love, inspire our prayer, work and generosity, that all people may have an abundance of clean, safe water. Amen.