

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**October 23, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: 2 Samuel 12:1-7a**

**Sermon: Because he had no pity (World Food Sunday)**

**“You are that man!”** Of all the Old Testament prophets, I think Nathan is one of my favourites. Nathan had the tough job of confronting the king, David, a man who, at this later stage of his life, was not known for his patience. And to make matters worse, this wasn’t even a confrontation about a relatively safe subject, like politics or economics or religion – those were subjects David was used to talking about with the prophet. No, this time, it was a confrontation about David’s personal life, his sex life, in fact.

A delicate matter, the story of David and Bathsheba, you might have heard it before. And so Nathan, knowing that David had made a series of choices that went from bad to worse, Nathan approached David with a brilliant bit of strategy. It’s not unlike the strategy of indigenous elders, wise people who are famous for answering a direct request for advice, with a convoluted parable or a story – so you can figure out for yourself the best way forward.

Thus Nathan sat David down and told him the story of a man who had many herds of sheep, countless livestock, so many he couldn’t tell one from another. Meanwhile his neighbour was a poor man, a man who had only one small lamb – and it was really more of a pet than a farm animal. This is how Nathan described it: it grew up with (the poor man) and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

The rich man was having a house guest, and custom demanded that he provide a feast in the visitor’s honour. No problem, you might think, he has so many sheep, what is one banquet of roasted lamb? But for some reason, instead of taking one of his many animals to slaughter, the rich man took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for supper.

David’s anger was sparked immediately! He said to Nathan, “bring me that unjust man – he deserves to die! But first he will return to the poor man four times what he had taken from him.” You see David still prided himself on being defender of the poor and powerless. Of course, he would take up the cause of the poor man against the rich one, with a vengeance. Punishing the fictional rich man was just the right thing to do, David said: “Because he had no pity.” Other translations say “compassion” or “mercy” or “caring.”

It wasn’t just because the man was poor, it wasn’t the stealing that bothered David. It was because the rich man failed to see how important that one lamb was to the poor man, David could relate to the poor man’s broken heart.

And then Nathan said: “You are that man.” Not the poor man with the broken heart, but the rich man who had fallen into a pattern of bad choices, and who was refusing to see the hurt he had caused.

David’s seduction or abduction of Bathsheba, his conspiracy to do away with her husband Uriah, his flouting of God’s justice just because he was the king – all these things were done in secret. Because David refused to acknowledge that he himself had had no pity or compassion for Bathsheba or Uriah. He kept telling himself he was okay, he was God’s anointed king, after all.

Until Nathan pointed at him and said: “You are that man.”

All around the world, people live with hunger, with food insecurity, and with the fear that maybe tomorrow or the day after that, they will not have the food they need.

In Canada, food prices are rising, and inflation is pushing more and more people to the brink. In a report released by Food Banks Canada, one in five Canadians (that’s 7 million people) reported that they went hungry at least once day between March 2020 and March 2022.

According to Food Banks Canada, 61 percent of Canadians now say that rising housing costs are preventing them from being able to afford food, and this is a statement that has doubled in the past year alone. So it’s not just about food, it’s a complicated issue, one that food banks and school breakfast programs can only begin to address. When resources are few, the rush to fill immediate needs are pitted against the long term change and the better food security that everyone needs.

How then do we understand our own role in maintaining a system that causes poverty and hunger for our neighbours? Perhaps we need a prophet like Nathan to look us in the eye and tell us “You are that man.” Or person or shopper or consumer or whatever. And while we are talking about it, the problem just grows and grows.

Globally 690,000,000 people will go to bed hungry tonight. 690,000,000 people aren’t asking, “What will we eat for dinner?” but “Will we eat dinner?” And they ask that question night after night.

Hunger is so pervasive you’d almost think that the whole earth was made of dust. That no crops could grow anywhere. But we know there’s nothing wrong with Mother Nature; the problem lies in the choices we make for her.

Poverty, land grabbing, climate change, the commodification of food and water, conflict and political instability.... The causes of hunger are so complex, so intertwined, so systemic, it’s only natural to wonder how you and I are really ever going to make a difference.

Through the Mission & Service, we already meet needs in Canada by providing emergency food hampers in times of crisis, stocking shelves at food banks, and serving

good, healthy meals through various outreach agencies. We also help provide longer-term change by supporting education opportunities, seeding community garden initiatives, and helping neighbourhoods set up systems to cope with the impact of conflict and climate change on their food systems.

And here's a global example: The organization Women for Change, Zambia, is one of over 100 partners supported through our Mission & Service. Since its inception in 1992, W4C has mobilized rural communities to share ideas and best practices, including on the topic of food sustainability. Today, 1,500 community groups are meeting regularly, each one gathering 25–40 people. Groups discuss how they can save and share seeds, what they can plant with longer or shorter rains, and if there are traditional methods that can increase food production. Altogether, 37,000 people have been learning together and have supported each other to address food insecurity. What an incredible impact!

But what is really touching is how Lumba Siyanga, the Executive Director of Women for Change, describes our relationship: "The United Church has been supporting us since 1995 and has been there for us through really challenging times. What sets the United Church apart is that you don't just give us money; you want to get to know us. It's a different approach. We really have a relationship. It's a true partnership."

By listening and being in relationship with our global partners and our community partners, we are demonstrating the kind of compassion and care that Nathan could not see working in David's heart. When we mark World Food Day, we are not just supporting another food bank (though that is important too!) Today we are seeing what we don't always see: that the need may be great, but the possibilities are even greater. Thanks be to God!

I would like to invite Lynn Sherwood, a member of Rideau Park and board member at Heron Emergency Food Centre, to share a Minute for Mission about the people she has met and the stories she hears through this very important work.