# A Distribution Spirituality: Sermon on Mark 6:30–46

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Well, the facts are in. And they’re not pretty. We’ve got a big problem in this wonderful nation of ours that affects millions of people in every community, every province, and some far more than others. It seems 10.3 percent of people between the ages of 18‒64, and 8.7 percent of people under the age of 18 live below the poverty line in Canada. Bad as these stats are, they conceal the alarming reality for Indigenous children. Currently 47 percent of First Nations children are living in poverty, and the rate is 53 percent—the highest in Canada, at three times the national rate—for those living on reserve. These are Statistics Canada numbers, and facts from an Indigenous news service, citing a recent study.1

This level of poverty exists even though we have all kinds of social, economic, and health safety nets. Millions of Canadians, many of them children, are still falling through the cracks.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, famous Jewish philosopher and activist, used to tell the story that when God, the Holy One, gets up in the morning, God gathers the angels of heaven around and asks this simple question: “Where does my creation need mending today?” And then Rabbi Heschel would continue, “Theology consists of worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning”2

Well, the scriptures of our faith are clear: When God gets up in the morning, one of the things God worries about is poverty. And if there is one place where creation needs mending, it is the economy of Canada that creates, perpetuates, and even supports our level of poverty. Christian folk, let us be clear. The Bible that we claim as a sacred text for our lives is unequivocal. We are called by God to care for the neighbour, to keep an eye out for one another. Story after story, deed after deed, parable after parable recorded in the scriptures of our faith tell us you cannot worship the God of your life without loving the neighbour of your life, especially those made “least ones”3 by the domination systems of life. Love of God and love of neighbour are inextricably linked. The prophets of Hebrew Scripture tell us this, and Jesus of the New Testament speaks the same.

That is the message of the Good Samaritan story, is it not: Look out for the neighbour who is hurting? And is that not the message of the workers in the vineyard story: your neighbour, regardless of how much they work, deserves a fair wage as much as you do. In other stories, we hear that if your neighbour is thirsty and hungry, or without clothes to wear, then you need to share what you have until they are OK. It’s that simple. That is Jesus’ way as portrayed in the gospels. Let us look for a moment at the Jesus loaves and fishes story. It’s a popular one. All four gospels record it in one fashion or another.

From childhood onward we have heard this story. And in most cases, we were taught that it was a kind of proof story of the miraculous nature of Jesus’ power. If we dig a little deeper, however, we find there are other meanings. In a little book called *The Last Week,* Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan tell us the real point of this story is not the miracle of multiplication.4 There is no hocus-pocus stuff going on here, no abracadabra or waving of a magic wand. On the contrary, what is going on, says Marcus Borg, is an act of distribution.

The writer of Mark’s gospel sets the context clearly. Ministry was at times exhausting. The ways of Herod, and the politics of Jesus’ time, were rough. The poor were having a suffering time trying to make ends meet. Jesus’ best friend John has just been killed, and Jesus decides that he needs some time away. He withdraws for some quiet to the countryside with his disciples.

The problem was people wouldn’t leave him alone. The writer of Mark in fact says up to 5,000 people followed him, a big crowd even by modern standards. They followed and they stayed for the whole day, so long in fact the daylight was fading, and it was getting time to eat. Hunger was setting in. The disciples sensed all of this, and clearly as far as they were concerned there was only one thing to do. “Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat" is the way the writer of Mark puts it (6:36). Send away and fend for themselves. That was the disciples’ solution to the hunger dilemma, and it made some sense did it not? They were in a deserted place after all. There was no comparable McDonald’s around the corner. For the disciples, it was time for them to go. The response of Jesus, however, was different and immediate. Turning to the disciples he said, “You give them something to eat!” A clear and utter rejection of the Send Away and Fend for Themselves solution the disciples had proposed.

Now this is where the story gets interesting. The disciples’ reaction to Jesus was quick and predictable. The first thing they did was raise an economic objection. It would take at least 200 denarii of bread to feed this crowd. The cost, in their judgment, was prohibitive. But still Jesus persisted. Tell the crowd to sit down on the grass, and then take whatever resources you have at your command and feed them. And Mark tells us the disciples heeded his instructions, and when they had finished, to the astonishment of everyone, they had baskets and baskets of food left over. The disciples’ anguish about not being able to feed the crowd was totally misplaced. When they got into the act, they had more than enough.

A lot of questions, of course, are left with this story. What actually happened God only knows. What we do know is that, faced with hunger, Jesus had compassion on the crowd and made sure they had something to eat. He utterly and totally rejected the Send Away and Fend for Themselves policy when faced with the basic need of people’s hunger. In its place he enacted a practice of holy distribution.

It is a compelling story, especially in light of the poverty stats we alluded to at the beginning of the sermon, which, as a reminder, point to the fact that millions of Canadians through no fault of their own live in poverty and don’t have enough food or provisions to live with dignity.

It could be argued that many factors go into creating the poverty conditions we have in a rich country like ours; we need to be vigilant and care deeply. A growing number of economists point to the enormous disparity between the poor and the rich and the fact that too few have too much at the expense of too many. An older United Nations Human Development report (2005) stated that the richest 500 people in the world earn more in combined income than the poorest 416 million.5 In Canada it is reported that 1 percent of households hold up to 26 percent of the wealth. It is estimated that tax avoidance offshore investments by Canadians amounts to between $80 and $240 billion.6 The fact is we don’t have a scarcity of resources problem in this nation, anymore than Jesus lacked food in the deserted place to feed the hungry crowd. We have an abundance of wealth and resources. The problem, as it was for Jesus when faced with the hungry crowd, is distribution. But this isn’t just any ordinary distribution. It is distribution that is fair and just. It is redistribution that we are talking about.

Send Them Away and Fend for Themselves ain’t going to cut it anymore. And neither are the myriad charitable acts we engage in from time to time. Depositing old clothes at dumpsters, handing out toonies to desperate street people, taking a few cans of goods to the nearest food bank may make us feel good and have some value but are like band aids to a deep wound when radical surgery is in order. And political rhetoric that makes promises to the middle class may work as campaign strategy but doesn’t put food on the table of the desperate ones.

The French economist Thomas Piketty, in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, argues that the wealth disparity gap is unsustainable in the long run and is the major cause of social and economic instability in the world; we need, he argues, to find some way to redistribute the wealth of the world.7

Any number of solutions are being proposed. Piketty argues for a progressive system of wealth taxation on the rich. Others, as the United Church is proposing, argue for a guaranteed livable income, which makes sure every Canadian, especially the ones struggling the most, have enough income to provide for the basic needs of life. This policy proposal is growing in support and urgency. It is one of the very strong options to redistribute the resources we have in this country. The feasibility of the proposal economically has been proven over and over again. Simply by reclaiming taxes on offshore investments in Canada could yield up to $5 billion a year to be applied to a GLI. And the justice of the proposal, given what we see and hear in the scriptures of our faith, is without question.

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus said to the disciples in response to their Send Away solution. With the sound of political campaigning in the winds of our nation at the moment, knowing that our leaders are about to gather in the policy corridors of Canada, and with the cries of people growing ever restless over the economic and social inequities of their living, it is time the directive of Jesus becomes our moral and ethical imperative. It is time to take action and make it be so. Amen

## Notes

1. APTN National News, “Half of First Nations Children on Reserve Live in Poverty, New Study Says,” July 9, 2019: [aptnnews.ca/national-news/half-of-first-nations-children-on-reserve-live-in-poverty-new-study-says/](https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/half-of-first-nations-children-on-reserve-live-in-poverty-new-study-says/). The Statistics Canada numbers for 2018 were calculated based on living costs in 2008. This reliance on out-of-date measures does not realistically account for the increased cost of living in 2018. Therefore, taking into consideration the costs of living in 2018, the number of people living below the poverty line is actually more than 4 million. This is due, in large part, to increased housing costs between 2008 and 2018. For more information: Jolson Lim, “Poverty Rate Sees Decline, as StatCan Set to Move to Redrawn Poverty Line,” iPolitics, February 24, 2020: [ipolitics.ca/2020/02/24/poverty-rate-sees-decline-as-statcan-set-to-move-to-redrawn-poverty-line/](https://ipolitics.ca/2020/02/24/poverty-rate-sees-decline-as-statcan-set-to-move-to-redrawn-poverty-line/). This information is cited in a Senate of Canada document entitled *Why a Guaranteed Livable Income*.

2. [*Mending the World*](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/partners-mission/interfaith-relations), a 1997 document of The United Church of Canada, from the Prelude.

3. Matthew 25:40.

4. Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem,* HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, pp. 114‒115.

5. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005*, p. 4: [hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2005](http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2005).

6. Zach Dubinsky, “Wealthy Canadians hiding up to $240B abroad, CRA says,” CBC News website, June 28, 2018, [cbc.ca/news/business/cra-tax-gap-foreign-holdings-1.4726983](https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/cra-tax-gap-foreign-holdings-1.4726983).

7. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Belknap Press, 2017.