

“Crumbs from Your Table”

John 6: selected verses

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In the verses immediately preceding our text this week, we read the familiar story of Jesus’ experience feeding the thousands who had gathered. Though he and his disciples were probably exhausted from long days of ministry, the author reminds us again that they spent time feeding people’s physical hunger.

After feeding the five thousand, Jesus and his disciples finally seemed to catch a break. They get in the boats — or at least the disciples do — and go on to the other side. Jesus, wanting to be sure that he has a bit of introvert time, decides to take an unusual commute by walking across the water, making sure that no one accompanies him so that he can have a little personal space. And just when they think that they might have a little bit of time to rest and recuperate, the crowds find them again and this is where we pick up the story this morning.

John 6:25-35, 48-51 – When the crowd found Jesus on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

(48) I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

You might imagine how relieved I was, how elated, when earlier this summer we worked out the preaching schedule and, looking ahead at the suggested lectionary readings for today I found this wonderful and familiar text. Jesus proclaims himself, reveals himself, to be the bread of life. “Ah, that’s a good story,” I thought. In fact, if we had reflected on these texts together last week, when we shared a communion meal of bread and cup, the sermon could have practically preached itself. There we are, about to partake in this ancient, beautiful ritual in which we will taste and see and experience this bread from heaven. This is the bread which sustains us and nurtures us as God continues to do every day. This is the bread of heaven that nurtures and sustains to go out into the world and to be bread for others. That’s it. Thank you very much. Thank you. Good night.

And in reality I suspect that in thousands of congregations around the country, throughout the world even, where they will be grappling with this text this morning, that may be the very message that is proclaimed. And friends, it is a great message. It is a message that we should be reminded of time and time again. But, we are not sharing that meal today so back to the drawing board. Reading the text again, I began to get nagged by one particular verse. I loved the “I am the bread of life” part. It’s the next part of it that’s tricky for me. Did it catch you up, too? Did you hear it? Listen again. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. [then] Whoever comes to me will *never* be hungry; whoever believes in me will *never* be thirsty.”

“Oh,” I thought, “if only that were true...if only that were really true.”

Now if we weren’t such proper Presbyterians I might engage us in an activity this morning. What would it be like if I invited everyone in the congregation this morning who honestly believes that they have come to Jesus, if they believe in Jesus, to stand.

If I were to do that, there would be an awful lot of people standing this morning. But then what if I asked you to think carefully, thoughtfully, about how many of us continue to experience deep hunger, deep thirst in our life. If that’s you, sit down. Would you sit down? I know I would. I suspect that the congregation may look a bit like it does just now. The truth is that we all continue to experience hunger and thirst in my life every day — not just physical hunger; no, deeper hungers—hunger for true community, relationships with others; hunger for deep, honest, transparent intimacy in relationships; hunger for an identity, for self worth and purpose in life that is meaningful and relevant; hunger for security, for safety, for knowing that my future is in place; hunger for a world in which I experience peace and justice for others as well as for myself; and mostly hunger for a spiritual connectedness, for a way to connect to God the

Divine that we experience as life-giving all the time. We continue to hunger and thirst for all of these things. So we might well wonder, “Have I missed it somehow? Have I not come to Jesus? Have I not believed in Jesus enough? Why do I continue to experience hunger? Why do I seem to be hungry for more?” Some days it seems we must only be getting the crumbs from the table, for we are still so hungry.

The reasons for our hunger are probably as complex as the layers of our very lives, the layers of our communities and our cultures, and so there are not going to be simple or universal remedies. But I do believe that there may be a few places where we can begin.

A couple of years ago I found a bright, shiny laminated flyer in my mailbox — you may have gotten it too. On the cover there is an Asian man in Tibetan-style robes looking off into the distance with a blissful smile on his lips, with knowing wisdom in his eyes, and other-worldly peace in his stance. The words on the cover of the flyer say, “There are many paths to wisdom, happiness and enlightenment, but only one leads to all three.” You open the flyer and see in bright green print the new Comcast Tripleplay. “Let us enlighten you,” it reads, “with one hundred percent pure, digital voice, internet and cable TV network connecting you to Chicagoland.” And there is our wise guru still wearing his orange robes, but now he’s also holding a phone, a computer mouse, and a Comcast cable digital remote control. It seems all around that we are being given easy answers to the deep hungers that we truly experience every day. There are times when we sit in front of the TV, not because there is anything interesting on TV, or rarely because there is, but because we long actually for community; we think that we are sitting down with friends, the six “Friends” from the Central Perk Café, or other friends; we wake up in the morning and sit with Matt and Al, grieving the fact that Katie has left to join the Evening News — I know I do. We want to be where everybody knows our name. We long for community but we try to feed that hunger in quick and shallow ways.

We long too for the deep transparent honesty of intimate relationships. Sometimes we make choices to feed that intimacy with relationships that only fill the short-term desires and not the long-term hungers that we have. In order to preserve a façade of intimate relationships we sometimes project the problems that we experience in those relationships onto others, or we fill the time between us talking about our homes, or our security, our children, or the dog, when really there is something else, a deeper hunger at stake that is not being addressed

We also experience a hunger for deep self-worth, for identity and purpose in life. Although you don’t see them much anymore, there used to be an ad campaign on TV for

the Hummer automobile. In the first, a mother and her young children are at a playground. A discourteous mother puts her child in front of another child in line for the slide, and the first mother says, “My child was there first.” But the rude mother simply says, “Not any more you’re not.” The mother then runs to a Hummer dealer, and purchases one. In another ad, a man in a supermarket checkout line sheepishly looks over his purchase items: tofu, veggie burgers, organic vegetables, and looks back at the man behind him who’s purchasing obscene amounts of beef and ribs and beer, and chips. In the next scene you see him running to the Hummer dealer to buy one. The tag line — this is true — the tag line on the commercial reads: “Restore your manhood.” Wow! At least they’re honest. They know that there are many ways in our culture and society today that we try to use a fast-food diet to fulfill deeper hungers and needs for self-worth, identity, and purpose.

We have hungers too for security and safety in our lives. Sometimes we meet that by tucking away money, or things, or items for security, for safety for our future. But even on a larger scale as a culture, and as a nation, we try to easily and quickly identify who our enemies are. Whether talking about issues in the Middle East, or on the U.S.-Mexico border, it’s tempting to quickly try to take sides, to revise history if necessary in order to more easily resolve these potentially frightening encounters with those who are unlike ourselves because we have a deep hunger for security, for safety.

I think too that we have this hunger for peace and justice in our world. We have a hunger to know that others experience the same tranquility and opportunities that we do. But oftentimes we get overwhelmed by the scope of the issues in the world before us and we find ourselves with a bit of compassion-fatigue trying to find easy, simple ways to address the world’s needs, to get us out of the responsibility of the pain and challenge that we encounter when we have that deep hunger for something more substantial.

And, finally, I think each of us in our own way has a deep hunger to know God more than we have ever known God, to have a connection with the Divine unlike any that we have yet experienced. Sometimes, I think we even try to fulfill that need here at church by the simple gestures and rituals alone — gestures and rituals which in and of themselves are beautiful, important mile-markers in our life of faith, but which are just that. They are only meant to be signs; signs like a billboard that point us to something more substantial, *someone* more real, something that will fill our hunger.

And yet, ...and yet I think that part of the reason that we experience these hungry feelings is because they are meant to be exactly that. Deeper hungers, like our physical hunger which keeps coming back again and again and again, compel us, or propel us, to

seek out and to gather food and nourishment. I think we are designed by God to continue seeking out the things that will meet our hunger. We are never meant to be satisfied once and for all — even with this bread of life. It's not meant to satisfy us once and for all, but for a moment. We have to keep moving forward, we have to keep searching and looking, because that's the way God has intended it to be. After all, Jesus taught us to pray for our *daily* bread, not a storehouse of bread.

Even when we have stuffed ourselves to the gills at Thanksgiving, and think to ourselves, "I will never eat again, or at least not until Christmas." And yet there I am every year the next day on Friday, with my belt slightly loosened, looking through the left-overs in the refrigerator thinking, "You know, if I put a couple of slices of turkey on one of those rolls, and put a little cheese on it, that would be pretty tasty." We continue to be hungry all the time. So, what does that mean for us, to try to understand how we fulfill these deep hungers and thirsts in our lives.

I have two reflections this morning: the first may seem simplistic, it may seem ridiculously obvious but for me it has been a bit of an epiphany. The first is this: know what you are hungry for. Know what it really is that you are hungry for. So many times we go about this business of our daily life trying to fulfill these hungers in a variety of ways, some of which are helpful and some of which honestly are not are not helpful. I don't think that's the end of the world, but I do think it's important that we take time, that we take stock once in a while, to think, "What is it that I am really hungry for; what is it that I am really trying to fulfill in this moment?"

I came across a reading this past week from Ann LaMott's book, *Traveling Mercies*. She's writing about her attempt to recover from an eating disorder. She's been meeting with Rita for some time and she writes about one of her sessions, "During one of our sessions the counselor asked me what I had for breakfast. 'Cereal,' I said. 'And were you hungry when you ate?' 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'I mean, did you experience hunger, and then make breakfast?' 'I don't really understand what you're asking,' I said. 'Let me put it this way,' she said. 'Why did you have breakfast?' 'Oh, I see,' I said, 'I had breakfast because it was breakfast time.' 'But were you hungry,' she asked. I stared at her for a moment, 'Is this a trick question?' I asked. 'No,' she said. 'I just want to know how you know it's time to eat.' 'I know it's eat because it's mealtime,' I said. 'It's morning, so I eat breakfast. Or it's midday, so I eat lunch, and so on.' To make a long story ever so slightly shorter, she finally asked me what it felt like when I was hungry, and I could not answer. I asked her to explain what it felt like when she was hungry and she described a sensation in her stomach of emptiness, an awareness of appetite. So for the next week my assignment was to notice what it felt like when I was hungry. It was

so strange. I was once again the world's oldest toddler. I walked around peering down as if to look inside my stomach, as if it was one of those old-fashioned front-loading washing machines with a window through which you could see the soapy water swirling over your clothes, and I paid attention until I was able to isolate this feeling in my stomach, a gritchy-kind of emptiness, like a cat that is scratching at the door wanting to be let in. 'Wonderful,' Rita said. Then she gave me my next assignment. First, to notice when I was hungry, and then — and this blew my mind — to feed myself."¹

First to notice when I was hungry, and then to feed myself. Do we take time to notice what it is we are truly hungry for? And when we do, can we rely on God's wisdom and strength to know how — how it is that we may go about feeding ourselves?

I think that one of the biggest challenges for us may be that, even though sometimes we erroneously or temporarily try to meet these hungers, and certainly we don't need to add to the stress of our everyday lives, about watching TV, or putting away a nest egg, or the many other things that we do, but are there ways that we can follow the wisdom of God to give us awareness. We can trust in the strength of God to undergird the choices that we can then make with our lives and our lifestyles and begin in small ways to make choices that will truly feed the hungers that we are aware of. Can we make choices to buy only what we need, and not all that we can afford? Can we make choices to learn about those issues and concerns in the world around us that resonate deep within us, and not be intimidated by the scope of the problems? Can we make choices to reach out and engage in fellowship, even in risk-taking relationships, rather than isolating ourselves? Can we make choices for self-guided reflection and time to invest in our spiritual life as much as we do in our physical and emotional and intellectual life, so that we may in the moment of quietness hear the voice of the triune God speaking to us in the midst of life's chaos? Oh, to be aware of our hunger, to learn God's ways in meeting our deepest needs, and to remember always that we feed that hunger every day. To remember that no great epiphany, no great moment of revelation is going to feed that hunger for all time. It will keep coming back to us, again and again.

In a way, our faith—our love of God of neighbor—is nourished by the corner bakery. We have to go back and get a fresh-baked loaf every day. And in a way, too, this church, First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, is like a corner bakery on this corner, a place where the children of God return again and again to get a new fresh-baked loaf. And when we do, we will never be hungry again.

Amen.

¹ Ann LaMott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).