

Hunger and Thirst  
August 6, 2017  
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Picture this: it is July in Vermont, a beautiful blue sky morning. A little girl wakes up and goes into the back yard, where the wild black raspberries are ripe. She picks a couple of handfuls and eats them with her cereal when she comes inside. This is a true story, and it happened a number of times when my daughter was 4, 5 and 6. Even then, without the rosy glasses of nostalgia, there was something magical and idyllic about this. Free berries – I did nothing to cultivate them – a child making her own breakfast out of the fruits of the field. It seemed like a metaphor for the abundant, free and unearned grace and love of God: a gift, if we are only wise enough – or young enough – to notice.

But I recognize that memory for what it is: an exception in a world of hunger and thirst. Those berries were not essential for my daughter's physical nutrition, and they would not make or break her chances of physical survival in this world. Hunger was just an added spice to the breakfast, not an existential threat.

Both of our Scripture readings today deal with hunger. They use the poetry and story to give invitations to hungry people. But they are dealing with many layers of meaning, woven together into a holistic view of the human person, and painting us a picture of the character of God as well.

Picture all those people - thousands, apparently – tracking Jesus around the lake, following even when it was totally impractical. What were their hungers? Can they be compared to our hungers? Back in chapter 11, Jesus had asked the crowds, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" and we might bring his rhetorical question to bear again. What would draw them and us out into a deserted place, and what would they and we most want to hear, to see, to feel? I could speculate, base on the text, about a couple of motivators. First, the crowd and Jesus may have shared feeling of grief and fear: John the Baptist had just been executed during a banquet at Herod's court. This would have been a devastating blow to those who looked on John as a prophet. Then, the crowd may have been hungry for the teachings of Jesus, for those quirky parables that touched their common lives so deeply. They may have been seeking enlightenment. Then, clearly many were sick and hoped to be healed. What do we hunger for most? What would draw us out of our safety zone, our comfort zone? What indeed are our deepest needs: not our wants, but our needs?

We have to be careful here to distinguish between an individualistic, feel-good kind of seeking and the deeper quest for God's grace and transformative power. We are not here as consumers; we are followers of a man who experienced all our hungers and fears and transcended them. I have been reading recently about Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, who studies the religious and spiritual lives of young adults. Mr. Smith describes a phenomenon called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" and says that it has displaced authentic Christianity as the true religion of American Christians. MTD (for short) is a kind of pseudo-religion that substitutes vaguely spiritual remedies for more traditional religious practices. And as a kind of therapy, it suits

a culture that loves to consume, that hungers for novelty, that seeks self-satisfaction. It looks for gifts without gratitude, soothing without a Soother.

And so our hungers become warped, apart from God and apart from the larger community. We imagine that Isaiah speaks to each one, personally, as he calls to everyone who thirsts and offers living water. We imagine that Jesus' healing touch and bread-filled hands reach out to us, as individuals: a one-on-one kind of gift. We imagine that attending church is a way to get a personal spiritual massage - along with the message ☺ - soothing us into a place of comfort and peace. People might say to the preacher, "I get enough bad news during the week. I don't need to hear more of it in a sermon." Now, I don't want to imply that people don't actually get terrible news about their health or their families some weeks, and really do need that healing presence. But sometimes comments like that have their origins in a comfortable life of privilege, which would be at risk if words about the unjust, the brutal, or the hungry world intrude. So, maybe we need to be clear about hunger. And maybe we need to be clear about God's response to hunger. After all, Matthew's Gospel has already told us that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us. Who is truly hungry and thirsty, and how does God respond?

As with the crowd at the lakeside, women and children are often ignored and uncounted when measuring success and failure. But the Children's Defense Fund put out a report in September 2015 that may help us with our math. When looking at poverty in the US, children are the poorest age group, and the poorest are children of color and those under age six. Poverty is defined as an annual income below \$24,230 for a family of four. In 19 states, and the District of Columbia, more than 10 percent of children lived in extreme poverty—which is defined as an annual income of less than half of the poverty level.

So that's one kind of hunger, staring us in the face. Ironically, it is compounded by our culture's unhealthy eating habits, in which obesity and malnutrition can coexist. I have to put aside the vision of a small child with berries in her hand long enough to look at a vision of a 5-year-old child of color in a poor county with empty hands. This brings forth a different kind of pain and hunger and thirst in me. I feel pain about a society that allows this to happen, I become thirsty for justice, hungry for an active compassion in the church.

There are many ways to look at the "miracle" of the feeding of the 5000 (not counting women and children). But if I look at Jesus as God-with-us, as the human face of God, I notice carefully what he does. First, the sight of the crowd causes compassion and he starts curing their sick. Then, when the disciples (practical followers that they are) suggest that the crowd needs to go way and take care of themselves, Jesus stops them. "They need **not** go away; **you** give them something to eat." Turns out that God is a delegator. The disciples find the bread and fish, the disciples distribute them. All Jesus does is bless them.

Is the church a place of refuge or a launching pad? Of course, it is both: that is what makes it such a holy place. Do we read Scripture for comfort or for transformation? Of course, we read it for both reasons. For me, the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 begins to tell how to make a transition from refuge to launching pad, from comfort to transformation.

Are we really disciples of Jesus, following in his ways, responding as we believe he would respond to the need around us? Perhaps we gather to become aware of our own hungers **as they relate** to the hungers of others. Perhaps we can use this time to sharpen our taste for generosity and

justice. And I believe that this is about both charity and activism, both generosity and advocacy. Why are children of color under six years old the hungriest people in our country? Let's feed them, but while we are at it, let's work on the ingrained institutional racism that allows it to happen. When we taste the generosity of God, that grace is offered "without money and without price" it should make us all the hungrier for the labors of compassion and transformation.

Master Eckhart, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, wrote these wise words:

**For not only bread  
but all things necessary  
for sustenance in this life  
are given on loan to us  
with others  
and because of others  
and for others  
to others through us.**

When we truly see our hunger and thirst as satisfied with others, because of others, for others, and through us to others, **then**, then will we be led out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before us will burst into song, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands, and those delicious ripe berries in our hands will savor of grace and hope. Amen.