



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“Hunger”

Matthew 14:13-21

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Reverend Ann Palmerton
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

Hunger announces its presence, stings with a pang. We know the warning signs all too well. Stomachs growl, concentration decreases, irritation rises. Are you hungry? Our gospel reading is about hunger.

Disciples feel hunger. Five thousand men—plus women and children, who apparently aren't counted—they follow Jesus and swarm to deserted green hills near the sea. It's dinner time. Disciples wish the crowds would disappear. They don't budge. If only they would leave! “Jesus, send them away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” (Matthew 14:15)

Hunger is a powerful motivator. Our hunger makes decisions for us. When we are hungry our goals shift, our perspective narrows. All the disciples can do is think about themselves. Hunger curves them inward. Hunger is complex. It raises anger and changes body chemistry, even brain chemistry. Hunger is complex and also a given.

Except when it's not. Have you ever spent time with someone who does not experience hunger, who has no appetite? Some medical treatments have the difficult side effect of decreasing hunger and the ability to taste. Now on the surface, that might sound like a convenient diet technique, but think twice. Life without hunger is a struggle. Just ask a man I'll call Bob. He knows he must eat, so he does, but he finds no pleasure in eating. He feels little to no hunger.

Bob's experience is foreign to me. I enjoy taste and the sensation of eating. In my younger years I could eat whatever I wanted. That's not the case anymore, but that hasn't stopped me from enjoying multiple scoops of raspberry chocolate chip ice cream this summer! For many of us, appetite, hunger, is a given.

And then there's spiritual hunger, a different kind of emptiness, a soul hunger. Such hunger is common. It feels like free-floating emptiness, lurking just below the surface of consciousness. An edginess, a longing, a desire that leaves us restless for...something, because something is missing. Something is out of balance. This hunger is real. It haunts lives and hearts and reveals how our usual diet of news, pop culture, and insecurity leaves us wanting and empty.

Success, stuff, even thrills can relieve our spiritual hunger and mimic satisfaction, but they don't actually satisfy. And so we cry out in the darkness for help. We despair at the way things are. This is spiritual hunger; a longing for the Source, for the One who nourishes; for the Maker of creatures whose living requires eating,

This is Jesus' territory. Jesus, the One who feeds with forgiveness and mercy and the bread of belonging. The claim of the church is that Jesus satisfies our deepest hungers, our longing for love and hope and authentic relationship. Our Christian tradition offers rich, time-tested practices for exploring our emptiness and longing, our spiritual hunger.

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

Ironically, our gospel story begins with Jesus as the hungry one. After hearing news of cousin John's gruesome, pointless death, he withdraws from his friends, broken-hearted and grieving. He paddles alone, out on the sea.

The crowd doesn't factor in Jesus' grief. He's still a crowd magnet. People walk miles around the sea, almost as fast as Jesus paddles. When he steps out of the boat, they intercept him. They surround him, as if they know what he really hungers for is community, not isolation.

The disciples' stomachs growl with hunger. They wait for Jesus to have compassion on them like he has done for hours with the crowds. Instead, Jesus' words punch them in the gut, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16)

What a jolt. Disciples, you give something. Church, Christians, work together, you feed them. People of faith, combine your efforts; give them something to eat. To Jesus, mutual emptiness is an opportunity: a holy opportunity to work together with God.

But disciples don't see it that way. "We have nothing..." Check our pockets, our backpacks. "We've got nothing. Well, between us we've got, one, two, three, four, five loaves and one, two fish." That's nothing. Jesus, we've got nothing." (Matthew 14:17)

But to Jesus those loaves and fish add up to something. "Bring them here to me." (Matthew 14:18) To him, disciples have more than enough. As if emptiness shared were holy. As if the hunger God gives is a gift.

But hunger doesn't feel like a gift. With one in every nine people in the world suffering chronic undernourishment, hunger is the world's problem. For all in need of food, hunger is a daily problem. Yes, we may eat today. But we still need to eat tomorrow. Hunger is a persistent and predictable condition of living. It doesn't feel like a gift. Yet Jesus treats it as if it is. From the perspective of Jesus, hunger presents an opportunity because it is an emptiness we all hold in common.

Jesus gives thanks for fish and loaves. He blesses and breaks. He gives the food back to disciples and they feed the people. Stomachs stop growling. The gospel makes a point to say that "all ate and were filled." (Matthew 14:20) Not teased with a few gulped down bites, but filled. No longer hungry.

Scripture gives us an image to hold on to, disciples moving through the crowds, lugging twelve baskets of leftovers, one big basket for each disciple. Even when we are empty, when we are sure we have nothing or are nothing or bring nothing, God surprises us.

Every day we stand in the shoes of the disciples. May we carry this image with us: disciples pulling heavy baskets up the hillside; disciples hoisting leftovers. What magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit! At any given moment, we are both those who feed others and those who are being fed. We are people who put our faith in action *and* who hunger in spirit.

In my experience it is not my physical self that is at risk to go without food, but my spirit. I don't fail to feed my body, but I can leave my spirit alone for days without nourishment or care. When I wake up to that reality, I am somehow surprised to find myself thin of faith or needy of encouragement. When it comes to Sunday, I'm hungry. There's an emptiness in me that only the Lord's Supper can fill.

This table is the place we come hungry. It is the modern day equivalent of that green hillside. Where emptiness is welcome and called holy. Here we aren't judged by what we accomplish. Here we are heard and understood, known for who we really are. At this table we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Bob is welcome at this table, too. Life without hunger is tough. He knows he has to eat to live. And so he has figured out how to eat when he doesn't feel hungry. He eats more slowly, and he always eats with others. While it isn't a perfect solution, it is satisfying enough. He has lost the ability to enjoy the taste of food, but with company, he says it's palatable.

At this table we eat with company. Our growling stomachs are signs of our common humanity, our earthiness, emptiness, neediness, reminders that our mutual hollowness binds us to one another.

Jesus knows how hungry we are. This morning he stands ready to feed us. So come, take a seat on the grass with the shepherd of your soul. Come to the table, where your hunger is a gift, a gift from God. Amen.