

Feeding Our Hunger - Susan Flanders, July 23, 2006  
Mk 6:30-44

A pastor of a church out in Colorado at the base of the Rockies tells of an encounter with a visiting couple – both very attractive, and healthy looking, probably affluent. When he asked them the same question I often ask newcomers, “What brought you to our church this morning?” they told him about their lives in glowing terms. He soon learned they were well-educated, with good jobs, a new home in a great neighborhood, kids doing well in good schools. They had obviously pursued and achieved the American Dream – the Good Life. But, they said they sensed something missing. They said they were looking for a connection to a spiritual community that would be (and this was their term) “the icing on the cake” for their otherwise wonderful lives.

“Icing on the cake” – What did they mean, wondered the minister. Obviously icing is not necessary for cake – it’s an extra. What exactly did they hope to find in his church? Wasn’t it something deeper and more important than just a bonus to their already satisfying lives? The pastor never found out – they came a few times, like careful consumers, looking to have their needs met, and then no more.

I wonder too, about what draws people here and keeps you coming in this busy “center of the universe” capital, where our lives are so full and busy and rewarding. Even if not for all of us, the paradigm of the good life does indeed seem to be success, accomplishment, security, and most of us have all of this – more than 99% of the rest of the planet. Why do we need church – do we need it? Is it just icing – something to enjoy once in awhile but otherwise push to the edge of the plate. After all, we’re already full – life is already sweet!

Of course, I can’t speak for the couple I’ve described, and perhaps the couple just used the term icing on the cake because they didn’t want to appear vulnerable or needy in any way. Even if they felt spiritually confused or incomplete, it might have been hard to acknowledge that – better to stick with the aesthetic approach – church as one more tastefully chosen course for the banquet of life – dessert for special occasions.

I can speak only for myself, and perhaps some of you. I come to church and stay in it out of a deep hunger – for God, for connection, and in the hope that somehow having churches, being a church is good for the world. (And this latter, with full knowledge that religion has been and is the source of enormous strife and violence in our world.) It is still my hope that church can make a difference, and a good one.

When I say hunger for God – what do I mean – where is my own spirit yearning to be fed? What can the Gospel tell me and you about God that can feed our hungry spirits? Right now, I'm very tired. I need rest; I have been too busy and have come home too many nights drained and feeling inadequate and overwhelmed by the administrative, financial and personnel issues we face. It feels like adequate planning has gotten away from me; it seems people never feel they have enough information. I know I need vacation, yet I feel guilty about all I will leave undone, the long list I'm leaving behind with Harrison and the wardens and lay leadership.

So where is God in connection with this hunger for renewal? When I get too busy, too caught up, I can lose a sense of God's presence, can forget to trust in a source of nourishment beyond myself – and, of course, this is blasphemy – putting myself beyond God's power to sustain, thinking I can or must do it all, and do it well. Maybe some of you are like this too.

Curiously, when I read this morning's gospel – about the loaves and the fishes – for what felt like the thousandth time, I had a new idea, and I do see a connection between this old story and my hunger for Sabbath time. Maybe Jesus and the disciples and the crowds who followed them were tired too, hassled and overburdened and wanting some relief. As the passage begins, the disciples have been really busy – teaching, healing, no time even to eat. They had come back together and were telling Jesus all the things they'd been doing – they had been such good disciples! What did they want from him? Approval? New and more responsible assignments, new powers?

What they got – was rest, a break. Jesus called them away to a quiet place by themselves. He must have known their hunger for rest, for re-connection with the power of God they felt when they first followed him, for re-connection with one another and with the essence of what they were trying to do. Their mission was no small thing – they were announcing God's Kingdom – breaking into the world, bringing healing and new life and hope and compassion. Easy to lose all that when you're on your feet all day, beset by crowds, physically hot and tired and hungry as well. Jesus didn't say do more, try harder, work smarter. He said "Let's get away, let's take a break" – maybe that's what God had to offer for those tired followers, and for us too.

But the passage continues. The break is short because the crowds follow them – and from here on, I take imaginative liberty with the text. But I wonder if Jesus isn't teaching by absolutely brilliant example here – teaching first the disciples, then the crowds, and finally, maybe – us.

When it is late and time for supper and the crowd is all still there and listening to Jesus, the disciples get back into type-A work mode – wondering

how to manage dinner. No Trader Joe's next door – what to do? Jesus basically tells them to depend on whatever resources they have, however scant. Somehow, what they have to offer will be enough. The same with the crowd. They too were busy, harried people – obviously hungry for spiritual food and now for supper as well. “Sit down on the green grass” said Jesus – get off your feet, take a break, leave it to me.

And they did. In this story, everyone got fed – not by attempting the impossible by their own efforts, but by accepting the rest and nourishment offered – God's love shown in this unexpected way. And maybe they found deeper connection with one another there in that meadow – passing food from hand to hand, smiling and relaxing as they recognized plenty instead of scarcity – enough to meet their needs and then some. And maybe the world seemed a better and more gracious place as they sat there in the cooling dusk – minds and hearts filled as well as bodies by that long day with Jesus. Their day had begun with rushing, crowding, chasing to get to Jesus, get a good spot, if they could only learn enough from the great teacher! Yet, at the end, there was peace and order and calm – a bit of the realm of God had come into the hectic bustle of their lives.

I've never thought about the story this way before – the miraculous and Eucharistic elements can so easily serve as distractions. But thinking about it in this way speaks to my spiritual hunger and maybe yours. Think of the loaves and fishes as symbols – the abundance they didn't think they had, the common meal through which they connected with each other, the sense that their gathering that day was good and that their lives were better for it. And it didn't come through their own striving. The disciples and the crowd as well got what they needed – a break, food for the soul, a picnic that was far more than icing on a cake!

But that day on the grass, or one or two Sundays in church or even a month in Maine or on Cape Cod are just the beginnings of the spiritual nourishment we all need. To say that this gospel story affirms our need for rest, or that God feeds our hunger with some nice spiritual affirmation when we show up, doesn't go far enough. Even the church shoppers out in Colorado would probably have agreed.

Rest and time apart are things we need desperately, not as ends in the themselves, but as part of the faith enterprise. We need them to give us new energy and fresh perspective. We need them to discern where our lives are taking us and how our lives are part of God's life. And then we need to live and act and love ever more fully – not to earn God's love or a place in the church – but because we already have these. We are already equipped for our mission.

Like Jesus and the disciples in today's story, we have enough resources to do what we need to do. Our deepest hungers can be fed. Our lives in God, our connections with each other and with this church community make demands, to be sure – sometimes hard ones that force us to change and adapt. The life of faith is only a picnic once in awhile, and...if we're looking for icing on the cake, we are in the wrong place; we should be at the bakery. Amen.