

10-4-26 sermon

Isaiah 55.1-2, 10-12; John 6.25-35

Just about every culture has bread of some kind – it's one of the few truly universal foods. I've eaten maize tortillas with the Quiche in the Guatemalan highlands. Fry bread with Navajo at Four Corners. Fou-fou with friends from West Africa. Bacon baps on worksites in England. Flatbread at every meal Maggie and I shared during our time in the West Bank. And, of course, white buns at countless cookouts in Texas and Kentucky. Bread is not only a central part of our lives, it's also a central part of the Story of God, and is at the very heart of our shared life as the church.

The prophet Isaiah asked the people,

“Why do you spend your money for that which is *not* bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Jesus cautioned the crowds,

“Do not work for the food that perishes,
but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

Both Isaiah's and Jesus' audiences were hungry. Literally, but also existentially. I can count the number of times I've experienced literal hunger on the fingers of one hand, usually because of some kind of medical issue. But I know a thing or two about the *existential* kind.

More than thirty years ago I found myself sitting in a room with a bunch of people drinking burnt coffee out of Styrofoam cups, who talked about that existential hunger – about that thirst. I'd accompanied a friend to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I realized that morning, that – while I may not be an alcoholic – there was a hunger inside me that seemed insatiable. There was a thirst inside me that seemed unquenchable. And over the years I had tried to satisfy that hunger in all kinds of ways. I spent my resources – money, time, energy, emotion – to try to quell that hunger, to try to quench that thirst, only to discover that when I was spent, the hunger was still there. Sometimes, the things I did just made the hunger worse. But the truth was, there *were* moments when the hunger went away. When the thirst *was* quenched, and in that place, even just for a moment, I no longer felt empty. I found some peace. Some connection. The critical voices in my head were quiet for once. I actually felt something other than the hunger. Which is why I kept going back to those things.

I suspect I might not be alone in that experience.

But then the moment passed – and the hunger came back with a vengeance. But I remembered that moment – and I wanted it back. And so begins the cycle... the life... of giving ourselves to something outside ourselves in an attempt to satisfy that hunger. Something that seems to promise so much, but which still – ultimately – leaves us hungry.

We humans give ourselves to so many things. Alcohol. Drugs – prescribed or otherwise. Other people. Sex. Education. Careers. Possessions. And yes, even religion. We pour our resources and our selves into those things, those people, those activities, desperately trying to fill that hole, to numb the pain, to satisfy the hunger, to slake the thirst, only to find that it's never enough. And it never lasts. Apparently 90% of people who become millionaires through playing the lottery keep playing. The hunger always proves to be bigger than what we do to try and feed it. Some of those things only make the hunger worse.

More than thirty years ago, a courageous and loving friend asked me the question that the prophet Isaiah asked: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, your earnings for what does not satisfy?" Or something along those lines. Perhaps a courageous person has asked *you* something along those lines. "Why do you...?" whatever it is. "Because clearly it's not working for you. It's never enough." Maybe you've *been* that courageous friend or family member and *asked* the question.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?"

Well, if you're like me, you can come up with all kinds of answers to that question. All kinds of rationalizations, justifications, for why we do the things we do. But the real answer is simple. There *is* a hunger inside of us, and – for some of us – nothing we do seems to fill it. No matter how hard we run at what sometimes seems to work – those things that give us moments when the hunger *does* go away – it always, always comes back.

Now, some of us have figured out how to take the edge off our hunger, at least. We've learned to live with a dull ache, not the sharp pangs of hunger. We do things that take the edge off, but which still leave a dull ache. I've come to believe the one we most commonly employ to tame the hunger is this: projecting into the future. To that day when we believe our hunger will finally be satisfied. The "when I..., then I...s":

When I get that promotion, *then* I'll be satisfied.

When I quit drinking so much.

When I get out of debt

When I retire.

When I get married.

When I have children.

When the children leave home.

Then I'll be alright – then the hunger will go away. And so, until "then", whatever our "then" is, we find ways to take the edge off our hunger.

But not to satisfy it.

Well, things were no different for people 2000 years ago. They were hungry. The crowds that flocked to Jesus were hungry for so much, and after the feeding of the 5000, which took place right before this passage in the Gospel of John, they followed Jesus, and said, “Do that again – give us the bread *again*.” And Jesus calls them on it. “You’re not interested in what I have to say – you just want the bread. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” The crowds respond, “Give us *that* bread then – we want the good stuff.” Jesus tells them, “*I* am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me, will never be thirsty.”

I wonder if the crowd started looking at each other, “Did you understand that?” Jesus says, “You can’t buy *this* bread – you can only receive it as a *gift*. From me.” A daily gift. Daily bread. Enough bread for today. Because daily bread is enough. Because *that* bread gives us a taste of hope. Just as God gave the gift of daily manna in the wilderness to our ancestors. If God gives us bread today – then God will give us bread tomorrow. So, I can relax. I can stop striving to secure my own future. I can stop doing all the things I’m driven to do to try and satisfy the hunger inside me. I can stop worrying. I can stop all my “when I, then I...s” Perhaps some of us feel a bit like the crowd that day, wondering, “What’s he talking about? What does, “I am the bread of life” mean? How is *that* going to take my actual hunger away?”

Twenty years ago, I heard something that cracked me wide open for a second time. I was discussing this passage in John with Rev. Dr. Jim Jackson, the Senior Pastor of the church we served in Houston, a passage he would preach himself that weekend. He said this: “Here’s the thing, Sean: Jesus is the bread. But he’s also the hunger.”

“He is the hunger. And he is the food.”

As I pondered that while I drank coffee the next morning, seeking inspiration for a sermon I could preach that night (much like I do here in Danville most Saturday mornings at Dry Stack), I realized something. Because we so often do *harmful* things to try to satisfy that hunger, to *dull* the pain we feel, we think the hunger *itself* is bad. But I no longer believe that that’s the case. Because that hunger, that pain, often serves a good purpose. It tells us that we’re not supposed to live like this. It tells us that what might have been done to us in the past was wrong.

That what we are doing to ourselves, and to others, now, is wrong. That this seeking bread that does *not* satisfy, is *not* what we were made for. The horror of leprosy is that you can’t feel pain anymore. You can’t feel the pain that the body uses to warn you, to scream, “Stop what you’re doing! You’re hurting yourself.” Pain is a good thing. It’s a gift. And, perhaps contrary to common sense, the hunger we feel is good. The hunger is a part of what it means to be human. The hunger is there because we were made for God, and until we get found *by* God, that hunger will keep us searching, even if we don’t realize what, or Who, we’re searching for. And we may well search – as country music poetically reminds us – in all the wrong places, but even in *those* places we may meet the One who is both

the *source* of the hunger, and the One who can *satisfy* it. Augustine said it like this – a saint who knew a thing or two about alcohol and sex – “Our hearts are restless...until they find their rest in God.”

He is the hunger, and he is the food.

Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Are you giving yourself to things that do not satisfy? Then come to the Table this morning – the invitation is clear:

“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
And your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Are you hungry? Come and eat! Even if you don’t understand it – come and eat! There is a profound mystery happening here at the Lord’s Table. And if you long for the hunger you may be feeling to be satisfied, if you want the bread that gives life, then the invitation this morning is to come, eat this bread, and in doing so, *meet* the Bread of Life.

May we do so, with gratitude and gladness.

May we do so, with hope.

Amen.