

Sermon: July 29, 2018 – John 6: 1-15
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

I begin today's message with two questions. The first question is, What feeds me? And the second question is, for what do I hunger? At first glance, these two questions may seem like the same thing – and in a perfectly aligned, well-adjusted life, I suppose they would be. My soul, or my belly, or the two working together, would accurately identify a need; and just the right thing to restore me to health, be it spiritual or physical, would satisfy that need.

But the two things don't always align. The hungers of my life may not have anything to do with the things I know will feed me and make me healthy. In the 6th chapter of John's gospel, seventy-one verses of roundabout brilliance, Jesus addresses the hungers of our lives, and where we can find real satisfaction for those hungers. Fortunately, the lectionary breaks these 71 verses it into smaller chunks, and today we begin with the 15 verses variously known as the feeding of the multitude, the feeding of the 5000, or simply, the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Whether one takes this as an eyewitness account of a miraculous Jesus-event, or as a later reflection by the early Church as it searched to describe how fully the hungers of their lives were fed by the risen Christ; it's a significant story - significant enough to be the only miracle story that shows up in all four gospels. The crowd, at first, gathers because they have heard about this local-ish guy, Jesus, from a tradesman's family up in the high country of Nazareth, who has been healing people and opening them to new ways of thinking about their lives. Their first hunger of today's lesson, then, is a spiritual or personal hunger: there is something missing, and they are at least willing to explore if this might be filled by Jesus. The second hunger, this one announced by their bellies, became evident as the day dragged on past suppertime. As the 6th chapter of John goes on to explain, these hungers were not only met, but surpassed, in the person and presence of Jesus. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, I want to return to those questions about hunger, which led off today's message.

It's safe to say that 100% of us in this room have at some point, perhaps in the past 24 hours, had to interpret what our body was really trying to tell us when it said to us, "I'm hungry." In an article in Prevention Magazine, writer Jessica Migala outlines that our physical hunger may have specific, important messages that we would be well-advised to listen to. The most basic of the messages is, of course, "you're hungry – time to eat." But some of the other messages being spoken by our hunger may be, "you need a break" or "time to get outside and go for a walk." Or perhaps you're actually thirsty, not hungry... or an emotional need is unmet... or you're missing specific nutrients, and your body is trying to tell you which ones. While it's easier said than done to learn how to interpret these messages – not to mention learning when you are actually hungry and when you are actually full – learning how to understand *these* signals can be an important starting point to understanding *other* messages that our body is trying to convey to us.

Stomach-hunger can be hard enough to decipher – and reminds us of the scandal of living in a world where roughly 1 in 9 suffer from chronic malnourishment. And what do we make of our other hungers, the ones calling out from our heart, soul, or spirit? Sociologist Martha Beck offers a menu of six spiritual "food groups" in answer to these deep yearnings of the soul.

These are (1) Stillness – practices of silence and meditation that take us away from the clatter of our preoccupations and into the depths of the holy gift of life. (2) Prayer; (3) Wisdom - Watching a TED talk, reading a good book, hearing a thoughtful lecture or maybe even a sermon. (4) Music – and movement – of which Martha writes, "According to some scientists, the rhythm and resonance of music activate areas of the brain that help us feel we belong to something larger and are connected to each other" (5) Nature; (6) Coming Together - in the act of gathering – with one friend, or with a community – we acknowledge our common humanity, and in the give-and-take of conversation or shared resources, our Spirits are lifted.

Most of what I've said about our hungers thus far has come from a positive standpoint, because I believe that this positive place is where God begins, as well. God's greatest intention is that all of God's children experience that state of broad-spectrum well-being we call SHALOM: abundance of Spirit, peace, health, wholeness. But I also know that the ways we express our hungers, and the food we seek to satisfy those longings, can be destructive.

Dr. Gabor Mate has written a profound book entitled, *In the realm of hungry ghosts: close encounters with addiction*, which speaks to the way that traumas we experience early in life shape our hungers. He writes, "Not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma, but I do believe they can all be traced to painful

experience. A hurt is at the centre of all addictive behaviours. It is present [in the alcoholic and the drug addict,] in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper and the workaholic.” He continues: “The greatest damage done by neglect, trauma or emotional loss is not the immediate pain they inflict but the long-term distortions they induce in the way a developing child will continue to interpret the world and her situation in it. All too often these ill-conditioned implicit beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies in our [adult] lives... Unwittingly, we write the story of our future from narratives based on the past.”

Fortunately, Mate goes on to describe positive therapeutic options, but the way that old hurts shape present realities is something I encounter this every day – when I hear folks in a coffee shop reacting to the day’s headlines, when I am called on for pastoral counselling, when I examine the darkness that lurks within some of my own hungers. Whether it started out with a parent was better at expressing their disappointment than their delight, or with someone in a position of power and trust who took advantage of that in abusive ways, so many of our unhealthy adult “hungers” have their origins way back when. And it is so important that we not just sit with these things, and let our hungers eat us alive. We need to develop safe places of care that include professionals and trusted friends, meditation and prayer practices that place these hurts in the context of a sea of love. Even within this room we have the skill-sets to help us and others walk through these hungers: spiritual direction, holistic nutrition and wellness, nursing, teaching, social work, philosophy, psychology, Christian practice, Healing Pathway, not to mention trusted friendship. Each of us has hungers and each of us can help to build safe spaces, where those hungers can be spoken of and addressed in healthy ways.

Which brings us back to that day, when five thousand men plus an un-enumerated number of women and children gathered for Jesus to feed their spiritual hunger and, eventually, their growling tummies. It started with an urge, a yearning, for a life that was lived for bigger purposes than those being foisted on them by their Roman overlords. That yearning, that hunger, led the to actually present themselves to Jesus, to hear what he had to say. And he, in turn, shared with them (and us) words and deeds that revealed God’s big agenda of love, in human terms that we can understand. Jesus understood their spiritual hunger, and taught them that our lives become bigger when we live in such a way that our neighbours are loved and included. He heard the hurts in the middle of their hungers, and was physically and emotionally present to them, assuring them that God is not pleased with a world where the elite dine in luxury while many of starvation. He responded to the lateness of the day and the need for food, by taking the most common of resources – 5 barley loaves and two fish, at best a peasant’s lunch for two, offered up by a young lad – as the starting point for an object lesson about what can happen when one person comes forward in generosity and love. God-in-Christ remains present to us in our hungers, physical and emotional and spiritual and relational and all combinations thereof, not just theoretically but practically. From the provision of friends who will listen to us and even pray with us, to people of faith working at issues of world food security, Christ remains engaged in all of our hungers, working to alleviate our pain and infuse our lives with hope.

And while there is so much more that I am just itching to say on this topic, I’m going to step aside and let someone else finish the sermon. This past Thursday, Richard Bott of Vancouver was elected Moderator of the United Church of Canada, and on Friday he preached at the closing worship of General Council 43. His sermon, as it turns out, was on this Sunday’s gospel lesson, which we will pick up part-way through, after he has outlined Phillip’s response to the food crisis (“it’s not in the budget”) and Andrew’s response (“this is hopeless – all we’ve got is this kid.”).

I present to you, The Right Reverend Richard Bott.

<https://youtu.be/A5ETRmaRAcc?t=3192> (53:14 to 55:59 - then French - then 56:39 to 58:13)

References cited: © 2018 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.

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