

HUNGER FOR GOD
Ex. 16:1-5, 13-18; Mk. 6:30-44
September 6, 2009

Thomas D. York
Knox Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

We do not live by bread alone. Neither do we live very long without it. There are about us and in us two hungers: hunger for bread and hunger for God. If we neglect them, either one, we diminish, shrivel, die. If we satisfy them, if we feed them, we live, grow, become.

(Read Mark 6:30-44)

He was born in Bethlehem; grew to manhood in Nazareth and around the age of 30 he came into the district of Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is present in the life of the world and inviting people to live in a new way, to live as if God were actually in charge of the world. He left no writing behind. He had no biographers. Those who wrote about him did so a full generation, and more, after his life, and then they were far more interested in his message than personal details.

One thing about the story seems beyond argument; the clear fact of history, that when he came into Galilee there was an immediate and strong response among the peasants and almost immediately a response by the authorities in Jerusalem. The people of Galilee listened to him. They dropped what they were doing and followed him, and the world has never been the same. Who were they - these faceless, nameless people in the crowd following Jesus?

Actually we know a lot about them. They were the poor people, the ones on the margin, disenfranchised, unimportant; and the sinners, all those nondescript men and women scratching for a living, trying to survive, with neither the time, inclination or wherewithal to pay attention to social niceties and who had never in their lives been inside a Synagogue. And tax collectors - those despicable characters who made their living working for the Romans and who profited by overcharging their own neighbors. And the untouchables, those who had the dreaded skin disease and who by religious and civil law were banished from the community and who, along with the deranged, and mentally ill, lived outside the towns, like wild animals, and the old ones, carried on the backs of their strong sons, or on pallets. And women and children whose roles in the world of the 1st century were rigidly defined. Women were property; children were expendable.

Professor John Dominic Crossan, in his book on Jesus, says that he proclaimed a Kingdom of "Nuisances and Nobodies," and that is who responded. People in that crowd had long ago concluded that they mattered not at all to anyone. [*Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*, p. 54]

It was a crowd unlike anyone had seen before. It was unsettling, to say the least - children, tax collectors, riff-raff, women, sick, blind, lepers. If you're a city hall politician in Jerusalem, even the rumor of a crowd like that gets your attention. There were a lot of them, perhaps several thousand on one occasion, each one of the writers remembers.

It was late in the day. He had sent his disciples out, two by two, to go to the Galilean towns, teaching and healing. It was their first experience with that sort of thing. The day they all

remembered was the appointed day of their return from their mission. As they began to gather, tired from walking, exhausted from their experience, hungry, they were eager to talk with one another and with him about what they had done and how it had gone. You've done that, returned from an important business trip, or some adventure into some new uncharted territory for you, and returned home wanting and needing nothing more than to talk about it with someone.

And so Jesus suggests that they take the night off, find a quiet place where they can have a good meal, some conversation afterward and then a good night's sleep. They climb in the boat and, with the setting sun behind them, make for the other shore of the lake. But the crowd, persistent, insistent, noisy, sees them leaving. The word spreads and the crowd begins to move and by the time the little boat reaches its destination a few miles up the shoreline, it isn't a quiet spot at all. The crowd is already there, only now it's even larger.

When he saw what was happening, Jesus changed the agenda. He had compassion for the crowd and spoke to them and mingled with them, and taught them, and listened to them. And my favorite part of the story is the disciple's wondering what happened to happy hour and dinner and that good night's sleep they were finally going to get. I'm with them. "Uh, Jesus," they say, "this is the quiet place, isn't it? Remember us, your friends - the meal - the nice evening together? It's getting late. How about we send them away now? They're getting hungry too and if they don't get a move on, the grocery stores are going to be closed. A testy exchange follows: *Disciples*: "Send them away." *Jesus*: "You give them something to eat." *Disciples*: "We don't have enough money to buy bread for everybody." *Jesus*: "What do you have?" *Disciples*: "Someone came up with five loaves of bread and two fish." *Jesus*: "Sit them down!"

And then, who knows what happened or how it happened. He blessed the bread. He prayed. He broke the bread and cut the fish. Everybody ate. Everybody had enough to eat and there was plenty left over for the disciples. Some think that his example of compassion inspired the crowd and that anyone who had brought food along shared it and there was enough for all. And some think that a thoughtful soul had purchased enough for everyone and at the right moment brought out the food. And some, most of us I sense, don't know how it happened or what happened, except that the ones who recalled it later agree that everybody was hungry and everybody was fed with bread but with something else as well, something equally important; something about a new kingdom which for them meant a new way to live life in this world; a new notion of what it means to be God's people; a new idea of a human community in which all are welcome and none are excluded because they are the wrong race, or have a frightening disease; a new way of being in which all the old rules that kept women out of sight and discarded unwanted children, and banished the sick and lame and blind, all that was gone and in its place they experienced that evening what Professor Crossan called a "radical egalitarianism."

Douglas John Hall is Professor of Theology at McGill University in Montreal and one of the very important Christian thinkers of our day. Not too long ago Professor was invited to prepare a paper for the Presbyterian Church (USA). It's a strong and challenging paper. In it Hall suggests that as this tumultuous century comes to an end a new millennium dawns North Americans are involved in four quests. The quest is for: Moral Authenticity; Community; Transcendence and Mystery, and Meaning. Values - Community - Transcendence - Meaning. Spiritual hunger? Hunger for God perhaps?

There are two hungers in us: a hunger for bread and a hunger for God. Sometimes we need to be convinced that our hunger for God is real. In a recent editorial in *The Door*, Mike Yaconelli, wrote that the trouble with religion is that “it talks too much about ‘commitment’ and not enough about ‘hunger.’” “If I am committed, then I am consistent, regular, disciplined, strong-willed. Heck, this doesn’t sound like Christianity, it sounds like a diet.” The word he wants to hear more of is “hunger.” As a religious word, “hunger,” he says, makes his soul tingle. “Faith isn’t so much a discipline as a hunger. I’ve been hungry for God from the beginning. He was told his longing for God was irrelevant. What was relevant was commitment. But now he knows the truth - that hunger for God is a gift, a sign of the Holy Spirit, an assurance that God is alive in your heart. [see Martin Marty, *Context*, 2/2/94]

St. Augustine wrote a beautiful truth in the opening of his *Confessions*: “Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” And theological mentor Professor Joseph Sittler, University of Chicago, put it in a way I remember a lot. “Hunger, unabated, is a kind of testimony to the reality of food. To want to have may become a strange kind of having.” [*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, p. 56]

There are two hungers in us. Trust your hunger for God as much as you trust your hunger for food. And before you start thinking about and worrying about what you are doing or not doing to fulfill your commitment - simply be hungry, and put yourself in that crowd and allow Jesus Christ to serve you - to break life-giving bread and feed you.... with the assurance that no matter what you think of yourself and the meaning of your life - your life is precious to God... with the promises that God’s gracious love extends to you, touches you even when you feel yourself to be untouchable, loves you even when you are unlovable, forgives you even when you think you are unforgivable. You are invited into a new community where all are welcome and where all know the good news that there is nothing in creation, nothing that can ever happen to you that will separate you from God’s holy love.

We need that as much as we need bread. We need to know that we matter, that God’s love for us seeks us, finds us, welcomes us and will never let us go.

Jesus, taking the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. And all ate and were filled. There are two hungers in us. And there is bread ... Bread of Life. Thanks be to God. Amen.