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John 6:35, 41-51
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The Hungry Heart of God

In working with undergraduates at Duke I have often used a little book called *Sleeping with Bread*. It is a beautiful book steeped in the spirituality of St. Ignatius.

The book begins like this:

“During the bombing of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night, the bread reminded them, “today I ate, and I will eat again tomorrow.”

When the students and I read the book together, we use it as a tool to help us discover the deep passions of our lives, the deepest desires of our hearts. The book suggests that at the end of each day we ask ourselves two basic questions: What were the most life-giving experiences of the day? In other words, where were the places and moments you experienced the most joy, the most insight, the most creativity, the most peace? And the other question, where were the encounters where you felt least alive? In other words, in what moments did you feel a lack of joy, a lack of passion, a lack insight and creativity? The assumption is that we trace the answers to these two questions over the course of time, at the end of a day, at the end of a week, at the end of a year, at the end of ten years. By intentionally doing the things that bring us the most joy and spark the imagination, we continue to tune our lives with the life-giving and joyful spirit of God. The students and I have found it to be an extremely helpful spiritual practice in discerning the mysterious will of God, and the book begins with a story of lonely, anxious children holding a piece of bread.

In the very last verse of John’s gospel for the morning, Jesus says “I am the living bread . . . and whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic gospels. They are earthy gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we get an image of the fully human Jesus engaged in fully human life, being with his friends, the daily routines of eating and praying, of reaching out to the sick and lonely, and teaching about the kingdom of God. If you place Matthew, Mark, and Luke side by side you will notice significant

similarities, many of the stories appear in more than one of the gospels. Some appear in all three. But the gospel of John is different. In their wisdom, the early church leaders knew that in order to get a handle on Jesus, one, two, three gospels wouldn't do it, we needed four gospels, four different narratives to complete the picture, like four different cameras rolling on the set of a movie, each providing a different angle, a different insight on the story. The gospel of John is poetry, and to read it, we need to read with the eyes of a poet. Reading this gospel is like standing before a Rembrandt or Picasso, or standing on the beach looking out to sea at dusk. We have to enter into the story in all its color, texture, and art.

John's gospel is filled with signs and images. Theologically, a sign is something that points beyond itself to a deeper reality. A sign helps us see something more clearly, something we might not see without the sign itself. A wedding ring is a sign, pointing to the larger reality of marriage. A family portrait is a sign; it is a portal into the broad essence of the family's life and story together. In holy communion, bread and wine are signs, pointing to the larger mystical reality of the body and blood of Christ. Theologians have described scripture itself as a sign, the lens through which we encounter truth. John's gospel is a gospel of signs. It is full of images and words that are to be read as a musician reads a score, always looking for the hidden meaning, the deeper truth, signs of the kingdom.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus uses signs. "I am the living water. I am the vine. I am the door. I am the way, truth, and life. I am the good shepherd." All signs. And now Jesus says, "I am bread." Bread for Jesus is a sign; it points to the very heart of God.

"I am bread." This is a bold claim Jesus is making when much of the world does not get enough bread to eat. A pastor friend of mine remembers the first time he encountered real hunger, real starvation. He went on a mission trip to Haiti with members from his church. He says, "One afternoon we piled into a little truck with two great pots of rice and went out to a desert-like place to desperately poor people who lived in a tiny group of grass huts beside a dry riverbed. There we were to offer these people food. Upon our approach, dozens of people ran toward our truck. Many of them were naked. All of them were starving. They frantically pushed in among us, thrusting little eating bowls in our direction. In a hectic five minutes they emptied over two hundred pounds of cooked rice. Then they fell silent and moved back to their huts and we drove away." He says, "I'll never get that sight out of my mind. To stare starvation in the face, to see what bread means to hungering persons, is to know the radical quality of Jesus' statement, 'I am bread.'"

There is deep hunger in the world and in our lives. Acute, suffering, physical hunger, and raw, empty, spiritual hunger. There is hunger for food, for hope and life, hunger for safety and release from worry, hunger for justice and righteousness, hunger for love and companionship, and into a hungry world Jesus says, "I am bread."

Jesus says "I am bread" in a world where up to 15,000 people a day are dying from malnutrition. Jesus says, "I am bread" on a college campus, like most other college

campuses, where perhaps 25% of undergraduate women and a rising number of undergraduate men are suffering from some kind of an eating disorder. Jesus says, “I am bread,” in the United States where obesity is on the rise in part because junk food is so plentiful and healthy food is so expensive, and in part because our habits of life are not what they should be.

Jesus says, “I am bread” to a Sunday morning congregation at Duke Chapel where perhaps there is someone, maybe many, who are well-fed and well-dressed and yet dying of hunger. And maybe there is someone else here who has been rushing about grabbing this or that, filling life with one experience after another, or one thing more and more, and the emptiness grows and the hunger becomes more severe, and you wonder what, if anything, might finally satisfy and bring rest. There is deep hunger of many kinds all around us.

And in the midst of so much hunger, perhaps sometimes, some of us may not experience any hunger at all. Maybe it’s because we are already so full, full of food, or full of material things, or full of stress, or anxiety, or maybe simply full of apathy. Maybe sometimes what we need is a little hunger, a bit of longing in our lives, hunger for goodness and compassion and truth, a pang of hunger for God. Jesus doesn’t want us to starve, but nor does Jesus want our lives to be so full there is no room for God. Like those little children in the opening story holding bread in order to sleep in peace, sometimes the place of our deepest hunger can become the place of our salvation.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of her hunger. It is a powerful story of alcohol and addiction, of her incredible talent as writer, of her immense emptiness and loneliness, and finally the discovery that all along she was being pursued by God in Christ. She describes the experience of being pursued by Jesus as being followed by a stray cat or kitten. Her hunger is finally satisfied at a small, charismatic African-American church. She tells the story like this:

“There was a time when for weeks everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left. When I eventually went back to church, I was so hung over that I couldn’t stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of extra-terrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling--and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said . . . ‘I quit.’ I took a long deep breath and said out loud, ‘All right. You can come in.’”

Lamott discovered that her deep hunger for something more in her life was really a desire for God. Lamott thought she was trying to hold on to God, but in the end, discovered God was holding on to her, and God in Christ would never give up until she opened the door.

I have been noticing the walls of my office this week. Leaving a place I love has heightened my awareness of the grace that is all around. On the wall of my office, just behind the door, near the Duke basketball signed by the 2007 team, is a clay cross. At the intersection of that cross, at the very heart of that cross, is a carefully crafted image of the world. The artist painted the world in deep greens and blues, and if you look closely you can see the outlines of Africa and North America, you can see a bit of South America, Europe, and the beginning of Asia. And there are words wrapped around that little globe resting at the heart of the cross, and those words read: This is my body. This is my blood.

That cross is more than a cross. It is a work of art. It is a sign. All the signs in John's gospel gather steam over the course of the story, like mountain streams rushing together in the valley pointing towards one overflowing river. All the signs in John's gospel point to one cosmic sign, and that sign is the cross. The cross of Christ is the final intersection of our deep hunger for God, and God's relentless hunger for us. And on the cross with arms outstretched Jesus the living bread holds each one of us, offering his life for the whole world, that every hungry heart would be filled.

Amen.