“So Hungry”
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 and John 6:24-35

The Rev. Sarah Reed

August 9, 2015

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
“So Hungry”
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 and John 6:24-35

God of love and hope and change,
I seek the strength to see my hungry self and imagine wholeness.
I seek patience to hear my story and the endurance to stay for all of it.
Turn my bleak thoughts into gentle encouragement.
May I feel compassion and believe in the steadfastness of your love and grace. Amen.

When was the last time you were hungry, I mean really hungry? My family reminds me that I’m quite unrealistic when I say something like, “If you’re hungry enough, you’ll eat what’s in front of you.” But still, I understand why they didn’t eat those early tofu dishes. I wasn’t that hungry either.

Gandhi once reflected, “There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

It was a large crowd that gathered on the hillside to hear Jesus and then follow him across the Sea of Galilee. The
word “crowd” here can be read as an exaggeration: a throng, a mob, a whole lot of people grumbling, looking for Jesus and they all tell him how hungry they are. The word “crowd” is also a mark of inclusivity. No matter where they came from, they became one people with a singular lament. We are so hungry!

In modern times we call it food security. Jesus fed them. They didn’t have to work for it. That seemed to be something worth repeating. It was probably worth patenting! They seem indignant when they eventually find Jesus across the water. “When did you come here?” It’s as if they expect Jesus to account to them for his movements.

Jesus’ response sounded both attentive and exasperated. What he said to these whiny people may be familiar to many parents (and many raised by parents) -- I’ll give you exactly what you’re asking for, so much so that you’ll lose your desire for it and maybe learn a lesson. Even so, Jesus appeared to chastise them as he turned to teaching. But, will the people follow instructions they may not understand? Blind obedience is not always a virtue in our world. However, in the world of this text, unquestioning allegiance was prized. Jesus required an “all in” commitment.
Think back to when the Israelites had just escaped pharaoh, they had great expectations for what they would find in the Promised Land. After all, what is a Promised Land, if not a place of Eden-like abundance? Yet all was not well. Where was the promise? They had been wandering for six weeks and they were hungry, broken and brokenhearted. The Israelites went to Moses with their suffering and Moses went to God and God advised Moses and Moses shared God’s word. That was thousands of years ago, and still today people feel overwhelmed, sick, hungry, and very often they feel like they’re drowning in a sea of worry. In the midst of pain and hunger - physical or emotional or spiritual - one moment can feel like a thousand years.

“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” – Mahatma Gandhi

The hunger we carry within us shapes our whole being – body, mind, and spirit. We probably grow into this hunger gradually. As we do, every part of us shifts and changes, like a grape vine grows around a wire until the wire is enveloped and it’s hard to tell the wire from the vine. Our hunger becomes our identity - who we are, the way we know ourselves. The glass through which we see ourselves can
become dark, murky and distorted. We can’t see clearly - ourselves, others, or God.

When hunger becomes intense, it’s easier to see ourselves as less than. It feels safer to say, “It’s just who I am. I’m at home here. It may be a minefield, but I know how to navigate this landscape. I know these rules.” That’s what the Israelites said to Moses. Leave my homeland, even though I was enslaved there? At least I knew who the enemy was.

Hunger and the fear that came with it was the enemy of the Israelites escaping Egypt, the enemy of the crowd who gathered around Jesus, and continues to be the enemy of people around the world and the people of Franklin County. Paradoxically, Jesus taught, “love your enemies.” An advisor once invited me to befriend my fear. I thought he was nuts – make friends with this dark side of me? No way, it will cost too much. I’m keeping my distance. Then I recalled my father’s advice on the farm. We had cows who didn’t like to be milked and they let you know by kicking. I was afraid of them and they were aware of my fear. My father said, “Get close, really close, even embrace that troublesome cow.” I didn’t like it, but I tried it and it worked. My hand and arm on the flank of the animal kept
me connected – I could anticipate her movement and she could feel my fear turn to confidence.

As persons who care for and about others, embracing our fear becomes transformed into compassionate care. Dorothy Day, a suffragist who was thrown in jail, wrote “The blackness of hell was all about me. The sorrows of the world encompassed me. I was like one gone down into a pit. Hope had forsaken me. I was that mother whose child had been raped and slain. I was the mother who had borne the monster who had done it. I was even that monster, feeling in my own heart every abomination.” This reflection demonstrates her empathic imagination to identify with others. This is the roots of compassion, the stuff that Jesus shared. This is ministry.

Suffering is built into the birth process of all creation – from the first separation of waters and sky and earth, right up to the labor pains of the most recent child born at Riverside, OSU or St. Ann’s. Pain is an inherent part of life and it is important that we not glorify or cling to or wallow in it. Wallowing let’s pain have power over us. By letting go, we become able to breathe freely again. Letting go means change – significant change.
But if you want me to change, don’t come at me with easy answers. Give me a safe space. Stay with me as long as it takes. Don’t take your helplessness out on me. Respect me. Acknowledge my pain. Hear me. Show me God’s grace and God’s caring. You may have to do it for years with no results, while I test you until you’d like to throw up your hands in frustration. Walk alongside me, keep faith with me. Believe in me.

In the description of the Last Supper found in John, there is no mention of Jesus taking bread and wine, no mention of the Eucharist, as we now call it, no Holy Communion. John speaks of the Eucharist in an indirect way. Last Sunday we had the story of the multiplication of the fish and loaves. After being well fed like that, who wouldn’t follow Jesus? This week, in an almost insulting comment Jesus says they are looking for him not because they understand but because their bellies were filled. Understand what? At the end of today’s Gospel is the answer: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”
Remember what Gandhi said, “There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

What we really hunger and thirst for is something much deeper than ordinary food and drink. We sometimes stuff ourselves, trying to fill the hole inside of us with food, as if we could eat something that would satisfy us. There have been times that I finished a meal and wanted more because what I had eaten just did not fill my deep hunger. The hunger that we long for is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread. Bread doesn’t last. Even the manna the Hebrew people had in the desert was rotten the next morning when they tried to hoard it. Jesus said, “Come to me and never hunger or thirst again.” The problem is that Jesus does not stay put. If we are to come to him we must always be on the move, always be willing to travel into the unfamiliar, to risk the uncomfortable. Manna in the desert or ordinary bread becomes familiar and comfortable. Not so the Bread of Life found in Jesus.

When we come to the altar to receive the “Bread of Life” and the “Cup of the New Covenant,” we take a risk to follow Jesus into his transforming mystery.
Recently, I participated in one of those poverty simulations that are designed to help us understand what poverty is really like. The thing is, everyone there knew this was an exercise and we would resume our life of abundance and privilege as soon as it ended. But even so, I became aware of how very solitary the experience was. For the most part, family units were alone. Seldom did I see people coming together to form communities or networks to support one another. There was little sense of connectedness or thought about working with neighbors or finding a guide to lead the way through the morass of social agencies.

I was also aware that each family and even the agencies in the exercise seemed to be focused on their scarcity and their limitations. We worked very hard to “make ends meet.” At the end of the exercise, John Edgar, leader of the Church for All People on Parsons Avenue, reminded us that we will be so much more successful in addressing poverty when we shift our focus from what we do not have to what we have and what we can accomplish through our hopes and pooled resources. We solve hunger issues not by sitting on the hill and wondering from whence comes the next meal, but by looking around at the gifts that we have available to us. When Jesus blessed the loaves and fishes to feed the five thousand, with baskets of food left over, the miracle may
have been about the transformation of the resources. I think it’s also about the transformation of people to open their hearts to share what they have with their neighbors. It’s about finding common ground and developing relationships.

I am reminded by the words of St Jerome that the presence of God is within each of us, “He whom we look down upon, whom we cannot bear to see, the very sight of whom causes us to vomit, is the same as we are, formed with us from the self same clay, compacted of the same elements. Whatever he suffers, we also can suffer.”

It’s true; we’re looking for the bread of life. We’re hungry for the spirit of God. If you watch television, you’ve probably seen the advertisement for a heart medication that begins, “what if you could prevent heart disease by eating just one stalk of broccoli or with just one push-up?” I wonder if we could receive the spirit of God by eating just one thing, or by doing just one thing. I think we can. I think practicing the compassion that Jesus demonstrated is that one thing. In Gandhi’s words “There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” Jesus’ compassionate response was to address hunger first by using the resources available, and
then by reminding us, “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. … I am the bread of life.”
Thanks be to God.

Copyright 2015, First Congregational Church, UCC