

8<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 12B Melinda J. Wagner  
2 Kings 4:42-44 First Immanuel Lutheran  
Psalm 145:10-18 Portland, Oregon  
Ephesians 3:14-21 July 26, 2009  
John 6:1-21

There is hunger, and then there's hunger. It isn't always easy to know the difference. I saw a little article about how to recognize what kind of hunger you have. Real hunger has definite physical symptoms – your stomach growls, you get a headache, you feel weak. Real hunger is a signal that you need to eat, to nourish your body. But false hunger comes from your mind, not your body. It's caused by psychological cravings, triggered by a TV commercial, or seeing a restaurant sign, or being bored or angry or lonely, and pretty soon you feel that urge for junk food. When you are physically hungry, you should eat. But when it's just a craving, you should wait it out until it fades away. (Mayo Clinic *Embody Health*, July 2009)

Isn't it interesting that we should need to have our hungers interpreted for us? When we are swimming in all the options and choices of our wealthy consumer culture, we do get confused. (And there's a whole lot of advertising money invested in *keeping* us confused!) So those of us who wish to live deliberately and faithfully will need to stay alert.

Jesus wants us to realize that there's hunger, and then there's hunger. That's what his miracle is all about. Five thousand-plus people on a hillside, and night is falling. They are getting hungry, physically hungry, with stomachs growling and headaches coming on. And Jesus takes the contents of a young boy's lunch box and feeds every one of them.

Scripture calls it a *sign* – something that points beyond itself. Jesus wants to direct people beyond their physical hunger to a more essential hunger – hunger with a capital H — their hunger to be connected to their Creator and everything the Creator wants to give. Jesus means for them to recognize that God's abundance is at work in this sign. Scripture says everyone ate their fill and was completely *satisfied*. But when are humans ever fully satisfied? Only God can do this! And there's more-- after the crowds eat all they could want, there are twelve large baskets left over. One for each of the twelve tribes of Israel — a symbolic way to say that God is able to satisfy not only them but the whole nation! The message of this magnificent *sign* is that everything these people, or any people, could ever want or need is right here before them in the person of Jesus Christ.

Of course the people don't quite get the sign – do any of us really get it? They mistake Jesus for a political hero and plot to make him king, to overthrow the Romans

to free their people. They're hungering for earthly justice, because that's the most magnificent thing they can imagine, but Jesus wants something for them that reaches beyond any earthly hunger or earthly kingdom.

Jesus wants them to experience God's kingdom, to draw them into the eternal, abundant reign and life of God. A life that satisfies the hunger beyond every hunger. A life that finds everything it could ever want or require in Christ. A life that trusts God to provide for daily bread and every other need. A life that experiences the cosmic abundance of that magnificent hillside meal.

We can thank Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann for reminding us that that this not some new age, self-help philosophy. This is the Bible's ancient, faithful worldview, which we are invited to make our own, so we can see the world the way God sees it, and want what God wants, and strive for the things God is bringing into being.

The Bible tells us that God loved this whole world into existence out of pure generosity. The Bible says we were all born out of God's infinite love, and we've been reborn through Christ's risen life. And we are created to live lives that reflect God's cosmic abundance. (*The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity*, Christian Century, Mar 24-31, 1999)

God's abundance is the exact opposite of how we naturally see things. Most days we are driven by a mindset of scarcity which convinces us there will never be enough to go around. Not enough money, not enough time, not enough food, not enough love. That's Philip's perspective in the miracle story. He says, "Look at these crowds -- six month's wages wouldn't feed them all!" We're like Philip, forever figuring, budgeting, scrimping, worrying there won't be enough. But Christ shows us that the kingdom of God is beyond any figuring or budgeting. The reign of God opens things up wide, with love enough to cross all barriers, forgiveness enough to cover every sin, mercy enough to soften every heart, and generosity enough to satisfy the hunger of every body, mind, and spirit. God's abundant reign explodes our categories and invites us to live in a way that is forever open, forever trusting, forever hoping and forever sharing, knowing that in Christ there is truly no lack of anything.

Abundance is the reality Jesus lives. So in Christ's life we see abundance breaking out everywhere, as he feeds and heals the masses, as he welcomes everyone, as he gives away everything he has on the cross and through God's power gets it all back -- and more -- on Easter morning. We see abundance flowing out from Christ at the Last Supper as he lifts the bread and breaks it and shares it, just the way he did with those five thousand on that hillside. And -- aha! -- we can't mistake the resonance. And we realize that every time we come to Christ's Table, here, we receive for ourselves the bread that Christ has broken for us. Every time we take part in

this holy meal, we ourselves are being drawn into God's abundance. Abundance that satisfies more hungers than we can even name.

Oh, I'd like to say a lot more about this. How we can either live our lives by the story of scarcity, and become small and pinched and greedy and anxious and selfish. Or we can live our lives by the story of abundance, and let God's wise and generous ways ease our fears and open us up to greater things. But I don't want to talk at you; I want to tell you a story.

It's one of the most powerful stories of hunger and abundance I've ever heard. It comes from the experience of Sara Miles, who wrote a book called *Take this Bread* (Ballantine, 2007) which our book group just finished discussing.

When Sara Miles first walked into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, she'd "never been to church before—never heard a gospel reading, never read a psalm, never said the Lord's Prayer." (Sara Miles, "Opening the Table" [www.godsfriends.org](http://www.godsfriends.org)) She'd been a lot of other places -- all over the war zones of Central American as a journalist, in and out of restaurant kitchens working as a cook, in and out of radical political organizations, in and out of multiple relationships. Sarah couldn't say what drew her into the church that Sunday morning, but she says before she knew it,

...someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, "the body of Christ," and handing me a goblet of sweet wine, saying, "the blood of Christ," and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

(Sara says,) I still can't explain my first communion. It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening — I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening — the piece of bread was the "body" of "Christ" ...; and what I *knew* was happening — that God... was real, and in my mouth — utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry. ...

All the way home, shocked, I scrambled for explanations. ...

Yet that impossible word, *Jesus*, lodged in me like a crumb. I said it over and over to myself ... I had no idea what it meant; I didn't know what to do with it. But it was realer than any thought of mine ... It was as real as the actual taste of the bread and wine. ...

I couldn't reconcile [that Communion] experience with anything I knew or had been told. But neither could I go away: For some inexplicable reason, I wanted that bread again. ... It was a sensation as urgent as physical hunger, pulling me back to the table at St. Gregory's through my fear and confusion." (Take this Bread, 59-60)

Sara found that, somehow, Christ satisfied a deeper hunger than she was able to name. It took a long time to sort out the relationship with God that opened to her at that Communion table. Over the months she returned to the Lord's Table again and again, and there were times when "all that grounded [her] were those pieces of bread." (70) She learned from the congregation, she read voraciously, and after a year of questioning, she was ready to be baptized.

Part of what Sara came to realize, instinctively, intrinsically, is that, having been fed by God, she was meant to feed others. She had a vision of opening the Lord's Table to those who were physically as well as spiritually hungry, people from the housing projects not far from the church. Literally, Sara envisioned turning the church worship space into a food pantry--and she made it happen. So, imagine the circular sanctuary of this beautiful church, which is a contemporary art space really, famous for its elaborate rotunda which is decorated with vibrant, colorful murals of dancing saints painted all around the ceiling... Imagine this elegant liturgical space being transformed into a food pantry every Friday, boxes of groceries trundled in by hand cart across the polished wood floors, fresh California farm produce arranged on tables around and even upon the central altar, a beautifully carved work of art. It's been going on for ten years now. And the pantry that first served 200 now serves up to 750 people a day.

"Take this Bread" is the story of Sara Miles' spiritual journey and the journey of her congregation, connecting the abundance of God which opened her spirit and the abundance of God they strive to express as they offer food to all, with no restrictions—honoring the dignity and meeting the needs of everyone who comes to them.

I commend their story to you. And I want to say that everything that is amazing about their story, I also see happening right here at First Immanuel. Every Sunday I see us encountering God's abundance as we come with open hands to the table of the Lord. I see us being rocked by the generosity of God, which satisfies the hunger beyond all hungers. And I see us going out from this table to share God's abundance with others. Many of us literally sharing food through the food box program and Loaves & Fishes and farmer's market that meet the physical hungers of others. And all of us, by being God's persons in the places we are planted, using our gifts to care for our friends, families, neighbors, those around us, all of us sharing God's abundance with a hungry world.

There is hunger, and then there's hunger. And in the life we share together, God is feeding us. Thanks be to God. Amen.