

Sunday, August 12, 2012

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I am deviating from my study of Paul's letters today because the lectionary reading addresses the issue of how we feed our hunger.

Given my experience last month in Oaxaca providing food to meet people's physical hunger and my week in Chautauqua studying the many ways to feed spiritual hunger, I chose to use John's words to frame our conversation today.

In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus is guiding his followers on their own spiritual journey, helping them to see how God's love can nourish us, mind, body and soul.

The reading is from John 6: 35, 41-51.

Sermon – "What Do You Hunger For?"

It is good to be back. My summer travels are over and I will be here, with you, for the foreseeable future.

I just returned last night from a week of study and prayer at Chautauqua Institution in Western New York.

For those of you unfamiliar with Chautauqua, it is an intentional Christian community formed over 120 years ago and dedicated to the integration of mind, body and spirit.

There are several opportunities each day for worship, lectures, cultural activities, sports and discussions.

The theme of study this past week was Ethics and we explored the issue of cheating.

Cheating was examined from all different perspectives – personal, institutional, financial, and spiritual.

I came away with a renewed commitment to integrity and discipline.

The preacher for the week was Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts from the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

Dr. Butts preached each morning and delivered one fiery sermon after another about all the sinful things we do to feed our hunger for power, prestige and self assurance.

One could not help but reflect on the pervasiveness of brokenness in our world today.

So what does all of this have to do with us, here, this morning?

Everything.

Everything, because we are part of this world.

As followers of Christ, we are called to examine what role we play in bringing God's kingdom into being.

As ministers in the world, we have a responsibility to feed the poor, care for the marginalized and to monitor and discipline ourselves.

When we were in Mexico last month we would gather at the end of each day to reflect on our experiences and to discuss the impact of the days events.

One night, after we had visited the people living in the dump, a young man asked me how God could abandon these people this way.

I have heard this question before – *where is your God* – when things seem particularly abysmal.

My response was the same it has been for years, God does not create the poor and the hungry – it is us.

God created the earth and blessed it with the resources needed to feed each created being.

The birds of the air, the animals on the ground, the fish in the sea and human beings, were all provided for.

It is us, human beings, who have developed cultures of greed that preclude us from sharing our resources with our brothers and sisters around the world.

In Mexico we were reminded what a privilege it is to have water. We quickly adapted to fewer showers, rationed drinking water, and turning the water off when brushing one's teeth.

These are small things, and we only needed to heed the situation for one week, but still, the lesson stands.

There are many in the world that have less than we could even imagine.

There has been a lot of talk in our country this year about the 1 percent – those people at the very top of the economic ladder vs the 99 percent who are said to represent the working person.

What is missing from this conversation is the recognition and acknowledgement that the United States represents a similar position in regard to much of the rest of the world.

If we want to advocate taxing the “very rich” in America in order to ease the burden on the rest, we must, at the same time, accept our responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who survive on a mere fraction of what we have.

God did not place us in countries or specific communities – God placed us in the world and our responsibilities are worldwide.

Our responsibilities are worldwide but they start with us individually.

This was the theme of the week at Chautauqua.

Our culture, it seems, has reached a point where the desire for individual satisfaction and appeasement has out paced our sense of community well-being or integrity.

Our social psyche has shifted, slowly over time, to a place where most people when asked will readily admit to cheating.

To feed our hunger for material possessions, professional achievement, financial success and relationship stability we are willing to lie, steal and manipulate – and we feel ok about that!

We justify our behavior by writing personal narratives of explanation.

“Everybody does it”

“the government is not entitled to my money”

“I have to look out for myself”

“I only cheat or lie or steal, once in a while”

“I am entitled to this”

Reverend Butts shared this humorous story.

A boy was sent home from school with a note that said he had been punished for stealing another boy's pencil. The boy's father was upset with him. He said, surely you know that you do not have to steal another boy's pencil. If you have need of a pencil you should let me know. I can easily bring you three pencils home from the office.

In Mali, last week, a woman was stoned to death for the crime of adultery. Cheating.

We hear these stories and we are outraged – at the stoning of a woman, not of the adultery.

How are we to stay centered and moral in such a corrupt world? What are the lessons that we teach our children?

I return to scripture for guidance.

God was very clear and specific in the Ten Commandments that he gave to Moses. I've preached on them before.

You know what they are – revisit them once in a while.

Jesus, in today's reading, clarifies that it is God who will nourish us – God who feeds our hunger and quenches our thirst.

I read one reflection on this passage this week that said this:

All of us have deep hungers and thirsts. We hunger to be in union with the cosmos; we thirst for peace and justice to fill our world; we hunger for wholeness and to be made "alive;" we thirst for forgiveness from sin; we hunger for the endurance to make it through one more day with dignity and courage. Ultimately, we all have a desire to experience God in our lives, and this is a hunger and a thirst that is sated in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I wondered if this was true.

Does everyone have this hunger for God?

Is this the hunger that we fill with material possessions, food, sex, and work?

Last Wednesday in the large athenaeum at Chautauqua approximately 100 people attended morning worship to hear Reverend Butts preach.

However, 4,000 attended the morning lecture in the same space, to hear NFL football commissioner, Roger Goodell, talk about cheating in sports.

The contrast was arresting.

I fear that we are becoming a culture where our relationship with God, our faith, our religion, is secondary to our other pursuits.

We gather each week as a church, as the Body of Christ, to be reminded – to be fed, to support one another.

The world is a challenging place but ethics start with you.

Look in the mirror at yourself – really study your face and ask yourself if you are a person of integrity.

You can't depend on others to identify this in you because so much of our lives are private, secret, and internal.

You are the only one – except God – who has the ability to look deep into your soul and know if you are honest and fair and loving.

God will feed our hunger – we just have to find our way to the table.

Let's talk about some of the challenges we face in society.

What hungers are you feeding?

What enticements do you find it most difficult to resist?

Has your sense of right and wrong changed over time?