

### **Bread of Life**

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

—John 6.35

August is a month of family vacations in the car. Curt is on one right now, probably wending his way back from Wisconsin. My family will be taking one soon, dipping our toe in the ritual waters of college tours. Such trips can be great fun, but they are also fraught with peril—close quarters in the car, lodgings of uneven quality, and...the most dangerous risk of all...the late dinner when everyone is over-hungry and over-tired.

I should know the signs by now, but I never see it coming. Some primal urge makes me want to drive “just a few more miles” or insist that we wait “until the next exit.” The next exit turns out to be 45 miles and has nothing but a package store. Hours pass by. When we finally do find some food, we usually have four restaurant choices and four opinions—not a formula for harmonious dining. Negotiations eventually lead to one choice, but then it turns out to have closed for the night during the time we were debating.

When we finally sit down at a table, we attack whatever food they’ll put down on the table before we order—bread, biscuits, chips and salsa...heck, *crackers*, if necessary. Anything. Something. We’re annoyed when the server is slow to bring the third basket of chips or bread. We’ve guzzled our drinks and by the time our orders arrive, we’re too tired to enjoy them. Conversation is right out. I pay the bill grumbling to myself that nobody enjoyed the meal and trying to feel happy about all of the extra miles we logged.

The moral of the story: (And, no, it isn’t, “Dad is crazy.”) There’s such a thing as being too hungry. We don’t, as they say, “make good food choices” when we’re famished. At some point, something changes in the natural order of things and we experience an odd inverse relationship between the intensity of our cravings and the degree of our satisfaction.

The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John is like a case study in what one commentator has aptly called famished craving.) The concept comes from a T.S. Eliot poem, but it is too hot to start quoting highbrow poetry today. I'll put it in a footnote.)<sup>1</sup> Earlier in the chapter, Jesus fed the multitudes. And the word was out. People were following him, wanting to know what they needed to do to perform miracles of food production themselves. But he was on to them, and wanted to steer them in a different direction: "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life..." Jesus is trying to point the crowd beyond material realities and toward spiritual ones, but they demand concrete signs. Their questions become more insistent, and by the end of the chapter things had turned from curiosity to outrage. Even the close disciples are having a hard time and say, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it." (John 6.60) Their "offence" (v. 61) becomes the occasion for deeper teaching.

In her wonderful book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott talks about learning to "feed herself" after years of living with bulimia. When she was bingeing and purging, she really had no sense of hunger. Just famished craving. Over time she learned to feel hunger and then to feed herself. She writes, "It is, finally, so wonderful to have learned to eat, to taste and love what slips down my throat, padding me, filling me up, that I'm not uncomfortable calling it a small miracle."<sup>2</sup>

In the sacrament of Communion we don't learn to feed ourselves, but we do learn to recalibrate our hunger and allow ourselves to be fed. We often come to this table in a state of famished craving. Our spiritual life has been starved out by our inattention to this one, deep hunger that is at the center of our being. We've listened to other hungers and appetites—for possessions, for success, for power—but we need a miracle to help us remember the hunger that really matters.

Our famished craving may show itself like it does on those ill-fated family car trips: in irritability and low mental functioning. But it is more likely to surface in more subtle ways. The crowd in John 6 seems to waver between fascination with the signs Jesus can perform and becoming bored if new signs and wonders aren't dished up fast enough. Our spiritual hunger

often appears as boredom. I read somewhere that the English word “boredom” may come from a French word that means “to stuff.”<sup>3</sup> Ironically, we are so stuffed with the things of this world that we fail to understand our hunger for eternity.

It is quite a state we’re in, isn’t it? Famished craving. Stuffed hunger. Our condition is extreme, but the treatment offered by Jesus is not. He doesn’t use scare tactics. He doesn’t promise quick results. He just offers a meal, gently feeding our true hunger.

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “famished craving” comes from Gil Bailie and is quoted at [http://girardianlectionary.net/year\\_b/proper13b.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/year_b/proper13b.htm). The poem, “Gerontion,” is from 1920. Here’s a bit:

...Think now  
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities. Think now  
She gives when our attention is distracted  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving..

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), page 197.

<sup>3</sup> Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* confirms only a possible French origin.