

# Hunger, Caretakers, and PEDMAS

July 28, 2024

## Hunger

It's been one of those weeks, and so I first beg your forgiveness. I've shared this Mark Twain quote with many of you before, "I didn't have time to write a short story, so I wrote a long one." This may not seem logical, but pastoring got in the way of writing one cohesive sermon this week, so I'm offering you three brief "sermonettes."

First, let's start off talking about hunger. Almost 20 years ago, I was serving a church on Brady Street in Milwaukee. The staff I was working with developed a deeply spiritual ritual. You see, somehow, despite working long hours, it seemed like no one ever remembered to bring a lunch. Right around noon, several days a week, you'd hear the pastor jingling his car keys outside of the church office, calling out "Anybody hungry?" We'd all quickly save whatever we were doing, grab our wallets, and converge in the hallway. We'd squeeze into his Camry, he'd drive to the edge of the parking lot, and then someone from the backseat would inevitably call out, "Where are we going?"...and there would be silence. It was stunning. In a car full of preachers and extroverts, a car full of people who, presumably, knew that they were going to need to feed themselves, no one came with ideas. Which way we turned out of the driveway usually depended on traffic, and then eventually, someone would ask, "What are you hungry for?" That answer would determine where we ended up.

This deeply spiritual ritual comes to mind today as the Lectionary launches us into a five-week-long detour into the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, also known as the Bread of Life discourse. We've been worshipping mostly with the Gospel of Mark this year, and will return to it in September, but for the next few weeks the Bread of Life will be our inspiration.

And so, as I've been praying about the Bread of Life this idea that what we're hungry for determines where we end up keeps rattling through my brain. Of course, the question isn't pasta or sushi, burgers or a salad. Do you hunger for connection? For meaning? For depth? Do you hunger for notoriety or excitement? Do you hunger for rest?

It's interesting, at the same time in my life as my staff's lunch field trip destinations were being determined by the answer to "What are you hungry for?" I also had a close friendship with a woman who had a lot of autoimmune issues. Among other things, this made her very attuned to her body, and specifically very attuned to her hunger. Whereas my colleagues would get in the car and it would seem like choosing a destination was a foreign concept, with her, if you made plans to share a meal, she would always be able to tell you what her body needed – protein or tomatoes or spinach or what have you.

With this in mind, as we immerse ourselves in the Bread of Life for the next few weeks, I invite you to spend some prayer time and spiritual energy diving deep into the question, "What is my soul, my inmost being, hungry for?" Not the quick-fix, junk food that will leave you hungry in an hour and feeling worse at the end of the day, but what will nourish your soul? What will give you the energy to pursue your depth and connection and flourishing? Spend some time in the next few weeks praying about that, and then turn the car toward that destination.

## **Caretakers**

Remember, that Mark Twain quote from the beginning, about not having time to write a short story and therefore writing a long one? I'd better get moving on to today's second sermonette. The second theme that's been rattling around in my prayers about today's Gospel takes on the idea of the Bread of Life from a very different angle. Lakota Medicine Woman Erica Crazy Hawk writes:

...In her enlightening book "Braiding Sweetgrass," author Robin Wall Kimmerer delves into the indigenous perspective on plants, shedding light on their crucial role as caretakers of humans. This indigenous worldview emphasizes a profound reverence and gratitude towards the botanical world, encapsulated in the notion of certain plants being referred to in Native languages as "those who take care of us." Such terminology underscores the deep-seated understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and plants, recognizing the ways in which plants sustain and provide for human life. By framing plants as caretakers, Native languages serve as a poignant reminder of the myriad ways in which plants nurture and support us.

This outlook stands in stark contrast to the prevailing Western view that often reduces plants to mere commodities, highlighting instead the intrinsic value and agency that plants possess. The Indigenous perspective challenges us to shift our paradigm from one of dominance and exploitation to one of stewardship and reciprocity. It beckons us to acknowledge the agency of plants and embrace our responsibility to care for them, thereby fostering a more balanced and respectful relationship with the natural world. Such indigenous wisdom engenders a sense of humility and gratitude, fostering a deeper connection with the natural world. It inspires a shift towards a mindset that values the mutual flourishing of all beings, promoting harmony and sustainability. By embracing this perspective and honoring the caretaking role of plants, we can cultivate a more symbiotic relationship with nature, ensuring the continued abundance of plant life for generations to come.

(Erica Crazy Hawk)

With this concept in dialogue with the Bread of Life, my second question or theme for us to meditate on is what is my relationship to what I consume, both literally and figuratively? An attitude toward the natural world as caretakers of us can powerfully realign our values and our consumption. And figuratively, feeding ourselves nourishing content, rather than a steady diet of violence and fear, can radically transform our experience of the world, and in turn, the world's experience of us. This, in turn, brings us back to "What are you hungry for?"

## **Multiplication**

Today's final sermonette today is about algebra. (I just saw the eyes of the only folks left in the congregation who are paying attention glass over.) When you're scrolling through the internet, do you ever do the math quizzes that pop up? I have to admit, solving for X brings me great joy. Maybe it's because so much in ministry is ambiguous and vague, but there's something

satisfying about how formulaic basic algebra is. If you look at the comments on any of these algebra quizzes, inevitably you'll see the acronym PEMDAS, which stands for:

P = parentheses,  
E = exponents,  
D = division,  
M = multiplication,  
A = addition,  
S = subtraction.

What's interesting for our purposes today, though, is the concept that, in a math equation, what you're standing next to, you multiply. For instance, if there's a number 2 next to the parentheses in an equation, whatever is in the parentheses is to be multiplied by 2.

Think about that from a spiritual perspective. What we stand next to is multiplied. With today's Gospel being the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the last prayer theme I invite you to explore is that what we stand next to, we multiply.

Do you stand next to graciousness and generosity?  
Do you stand next to mercy and healing?  
Or do you stand next to selfishness and stinginess, closed mindedness and bigotry?

What you stand next to, you multiply.

Do you stand next to justice or injustice?  
Do you stand next to fear of those who are different from you or curiosity about them?

In the passage Karen read for us today from the Letter to the Ephesians, our author writes that they pray God will grant us strength in our inner beings through the Holy Spirit, that we may comprehend the height and breadth and depth of Christ's love for us, and that, in turn, that we will be filled with God.

Friends, that is my prayer, too. As we tuck into this month-long feast on the Bread of Life, my prayer is that you will hunger and thirst for that which is of God, that you will look to all that you consume as a caretaker of body, mind, and spirit, and that you will stand next to that which is worthy of being multiplied – grace and hope and joy and justice and love. As is often a theme in our Communion prayers, may we consume who Jesus was and what he was about, that it is him who courses through our veins, him whose energy animates our very being. May it be so. Alleluia and amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-13**  
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