

Rohana's Reflection

For What Do We Hunger?

August 5, 2012

Rather than feeling alone in the pew with my little piece of bread and cup of grape juice while I was reminded what a sinner I was, and I should repent and be penitent while partaking ... now I felt accepted for who I was, included in a caring community, enjoying a symbolic meal that somehow brought the Risen Christ present to me, to our community, to our world. ~ Rohana

Scripture Readings

Whether you take what is written in the Bible as fact, metaphor or story, listen to these words now, for the meaning they hold for you this day.

Exodus 16:2-15

In Egypt the Israelites ate their fill of bread. In the wilderness they hunger, and God sends bread from heaven.

Psalm 78: vs. 1-3, 23-29

God rained down manna and quail from heaven The people ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved.

John 6:24-35

Jesus tells the crowd to not work for the bread that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.

At this time of year for many of us, it is hard to imagine hunger. During the summer there are picnics, weddings, family reunions, community salmon barbeques, the concert on the Green, and birthday parties! We are fortunate to have more than enough food to eat. Unfortunately, there are some in our midst and throughout the world who do experience hunger; it is an ongoing challenge to provide food for the hungry. You might be aware that millions of Muslims are fasting in this month of Ramadhan; one reason they fast is to gain sensitivity to the suffering of the hungry.

For the communities in today's texts, hunger was real. The Israelites, led by Moses, had escaped from Egypt and were wandering in the desert, grumbling because there was no

food. God heard their complaining and sent them meat in the evening and bread in the morning. "Then you shall know that I am the lord your God" wrote the author of Exodus. The message was "God provides"! Then we heard the continuing story from the gospel of John. After the crowd of 5000 was fed from 5 loaves and 2 fishes, many followed Jesus and the disciples to the other side of the lake. They were people who hadn't accepted Jesus as the Son of God and were relying on the new Christian community for charity. This was understandable at a time when many people, experiencing hunger, lived from hand to mouth. They received 50% of their calories from bread.

Jesus accused them of only looking for him because they had eaten their fill of the loaves. He exhorted them to not work for the food that perished, but for the food that he could give them that would endure for eternal life.

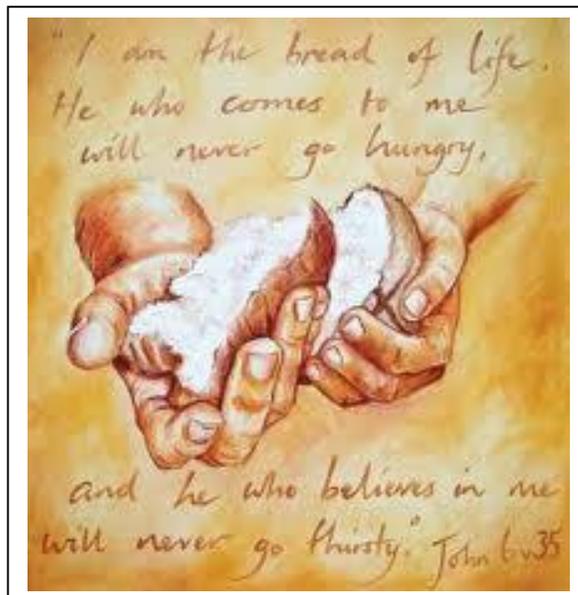
Biblical scholars suspect that Jesus would have been sympathetic to the struggles of the people for survival. We don't know what he really said to them, or if the incident happened as written. We do know that the author of John had a theological agenda, because the story leads to the last verse in today's text when Jesus said to the crowds "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The author of John, in using the "I am" for Jesus ("I am the bread of life, I am the way, the light, the door etc.) was reflecting back to the Hebrew scripture's use of "Yahwey" (I am what I am) for God. Jesus' "I am" described how he and God were one. (The "I am" expression makes for an interesting study).

The author of John wanted people to understand Jesus as the bread of life. Just as God was the source of the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert, God was the source that gave Jesus to the people. The only sign they needed was to be open to the possibility that God had given a Saviour in the unlikely form of an itinerant preacher/healer/ miracle worker (instead of a sanctioned priest).

Despite the author of John's criticism of the people for only looking for bread to feed their stomachs, large numbers of people who were spiritually hungry did follow Jesus. In John's context there was a synagogue struggle between the Judeans who didn't accept Jesus and the new Christians. New

Testament authors described how fast the Jesus movement spread, and how its members believed in Jesus as the bread of life. Especially after he was crucified, the Christian community found meaning in re-enacting the last supper Jesus had with his disciples.



At first not everyone was welcome, like we are. Only people who were seriously committed to living as disciples or followers of Jesus were welcomed at the Eucharist or thanksgiving. Only people the early church saw demonstrate their faith in their lives were included. They had to be prepared, to question themselves as to whether they were being good disciples in order to be worthy of participation in the communion liturgy. There are still echoes of this in our present day communion liturgies.

Then when they did partake, it was part of a community meal which included the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine. The need for physical nourishment wasn't separated from the need for spiritual nourishment. Some people got carried away however, eating and drinking too much, and the practice gradually became simplified. But Jesus knew physical and spiritual food

were both important, since he spent much of his time caring for people who were poor and hungry.

Jesus offered the people who followed him a vigorous way of daily and lifelong discipleship to him. They were not only hungry for food but for experience of God, experience of love and acceptance that they received when in his presence. There are many testimonials in the bible, and throughout 2000 years of history of people seeking and finding knowledge of God through Jesus.

For what then do we hunger? Do we still have some of the zeal of those first disciples, seeking experience of God?

Perhaps some of you have always known there was a God, and were always able to find meaningful ways to worship and to live your lives. For others, however, it has been a hunger. Often such people are called “seekers” and many of them find their way to the United Church. I was one of them.

My father’s family were lapsed Anglicans so I never attended an Anglican church. My mother’s family was staunch Baptists and I was introduced to Christianity through a 1950’s style of bible-pounding, finger wagging, guilt producing, theatrical style of worship. It didn’t take. But God hadn’t forgotten me; perhaps because I was baptized a Christian and my ancestors were sincere, God continued to pursue me. I read a lot of books and attended many places of worship.

In my early thirties I settled on the United Church as a place where I could explore my spirituality in an atmosphere that I could accept, and an inclusive community where I experienced acceptance. When the minister asked if I would join the church I said “I am

not sure I can because I don’t believe everything that I think I am supposed to believe to be a Christian”. Many of those beliefs turned out to be erroneous, based perhaps on the rigid Baptist interpretation I had experienced. When he responded “O no, we are all in process here. You don’t have to adhere to a list of beliefs, just a heart open to worship God and a mind open to grow in understanding.” That worked for me, I joined, and as you can guess, ended up being a United church minister! And I am still in process! Christianity, as the religion of my ancestors and an important part of my Canadian culture, when interpreted in ways I can understand and accept, feeds my soul.

Even the sacrament of communion when understood as a community meal shared in love and gratitude for God’s giving of Jesus to the world, feeds my soul. My appreciation grew when I attended the Vancouver School of Theology because it felt like a joyful act of gratitude. I could almost dance up the aisle to receive the bread and wine with students from all denominations. Rather than feeling alone in the pew with my little piece of bread and cup of grape juice while I was reminded what a sinner I was, and I should repent and be penitent while partaking (usually to a background of slow, somber organ music), now I felt accepted for who I was, included in a caring community, enjoying a symbolic meal that somehow brought the Risen Christ present to me, to our community, to our world.

This was just after the World Council of Churches met at UBC in 1993, and the theology school was enjoying much of the new, international Christian music that many of us now sing, like “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ” that we sang last week, adapted from a Jamaican folk song. Combined with my in depth studies of Christian history and Biblical studies I

discovered depth, truths, and so much meaning in the Christian faith that I had not known up to that point. My hunger was being satisfied.

I would love to hear your stories. I know many of you are seekers like me. Many of you take the road less traveled and make meaningful discoveries of faith. You have the wisdom to recognize your spiritual hunger and to act on it at a time in Canadian history when it is not necessary or even socially “cool” to attend church. Many people do not feel hunger for God, but especially in times of crises, wish they had a meaningful faith.

I share with you one more story, written by Sara Miles in her book Take This Bread. She called it “Actual Food”. She wrote:

One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. This was my first communion. It changed everything. Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food-indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people

I invite you to explore whether taking communion can feed your soul in ways that are meaningful and satisfying to you. It need not be a meaningless ritual. If we are going to do it, we need to understand why and value it as a meaningful way of worshipping God. Let us continue our community exploration of the sacrament of communion and pray for God's guidance in that process.

Let us pray:

O God, we pray that we may be guided to recognize and acknowledge our spiritual hunger. May we continue to work to alleviate physical hunger in our community and in our world. We give thanks for Jesus whom you sent to help us meet our physical and spiritual needs. For the bread of life, we give you thanks, in Jesus name. Amen.

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