

Enduring Food

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29;
Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are two terrible hungers which confront us this day – war and world hunger, and they both speak of a deep human need to be fed, not with victory, for that is always short lived, and not with bread, for it only grants temporary relief. But both of these things that confront us, war and world hunger, grow out of a terrible famine of the human spirit, the human soul. And it is this sort of hunger, this sort of starvation, this sort of famine, which Jesus is addressing in this morning's gospel.

Now, Steven was hungry. Steven was an American serviceman who had fought and been wounded in the Viet Nam war. He had come. And at home he began to reflect on all that he had experienced on the battlefield and began to review his life, both before he left and after he returned home. Steven recognized a deep, deep hunger within himself, a hunger which he realized he shared with the rest of his family.

And of course the question could be raised this morning: What of our hungers? What is it that we hunger for, that we're here this morning? Oh, physically we're not hungry at all; we're surrounded by all of the world's foods, in and out of season, as any brief wandering down a supermarket aisle will prove. But there is another hunger, isn't there? A hunger to really hear the word of God, to really understand what the word of God is saying; a hunger to serve Him as His people; a hunger as Paul puts it, "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called . . .". To that end, particularly today, we baptized Nathaniel Thomas Eddy, Eleanor Rivers Ballantine, and Grace Elizabeth Potter.

Now, it is in our baptism that we first receive God's grace, the gift of faith, the gift of trust, and the beginning, or the foundation if you will, of what can become a worthy life. All the ingredients are contained in the promises we heard made. They seem to be such simple promises to make, such easy things to say, such easy promises to keep. But it's important to realize that these promises are not only the promises the parents took this morning for their babies, but they are the promises we all took for ourselves when we were confirmed, just as these babies, when they grow, will take upon themselves the promises their parents made this morning.

But it is what lies behind these promises if it isn't the presence and the power of the grace of God? It's that presence that enables us to complete the promises we make as we struggle to keep them every day of our lives. I think it goes something like this.

Steven realized that the hunger which faced him wasn't physical, but spiritual. And he understood that as he began to grasp the compassion and love that God has for him in and through Christ. He began to understand that it was really true, that God loved him just the way he was. That understanding moved

him to talk with his family and bring them to understand and live that love, or at least attempt to, in their daily lives.

When his daughter Lydia expressed doubts about angels and heaven, he shared his faith as he understood it, not as some theological textbook would have it, but as he felt he believed in his heart. And when she befriended an African-American girl and they became best friends, he supported her, even though they lived in a very small, racially divided, southern town.

And when it came to her older brother Stu (not me, the names just happen to be the same), Steven taught him to be compassionate, understanding, and non-violent. Non-violence was, in Steven's view, essential, because the children were involved in a war of their own – they were caught up in a struggle with the Lipnicki children over who owned a tree house. To make matters worse, the Lipnicki children's father was the owner of the local junkyard, and he was much meaner than Bad Bad Lee Roy Brown – I'm sure you all know how the song goes.

Visiting the county fair one afternoon, Steven left his children while he went to get them cotton candy and, you guessed it, – while he was gone, the Lipnicki boys came up and started a fight with Stu. Steven came back with the cotton candy, broke up the fight, and began to talk with his children about what was going on and what had happened to them. While he was talking to his kids, he looked over at a nearby bench and there were the Lipnicki kids . . . glaring daggers at Steven and his family.

Now Jesus doesn't come to us with cotton candy to talk nice soft words, but He did return to the crowd He had just fed, the crowd that was waiting for Him. They were not glaring at Him but, since their attempt to make Him their king had failed – (Do you remember last week's gospel? Well this week's story was pulled right out of the middle of last week's text. He has just fed them, and here they are expectantly awaiting their next meal) – Jesus confronts them with what it is they are really asking of Him, nothing more than having Him fill their bellies yet again, when what He has to offer them is the food that will endure to eternal life.

The crowd's preoccupation with having a fully belly, with being fed, has diverted them from seeing what it is really matters – God's offer of eternal life given to us freely in and through Jesus Christ.

Eternal life. Freely given. Isn't that what we seek for our children when we bring them to be baptized? If we're honest, isn't that what we all want? The crowd's question might well be ours: "What do we have to do to get eternal life?" Jesus' answer is not what we expect. Instead of doing "works", Jesus says, you (they and us) should "believe in the One whom God has sent."

On its surface, the answer seems simple: Trust in the One sent by God, have faith in what He says and in what He shows Himself to be. And yet the answer is much more complex than that, isn't it? Even the disciples struggle with what He's saying to them. The miracle that really matters, Jesus is saying, is not the feeding of five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, the real miracle is the miracle of faith, when God breaks through our misconceptions we have about life; when God breaks into our endless pursuit of satisfaction and satisfying answers, our endless self-centered worlds, He breaks into those to reveal a radically new way of being, a radically new age embodied in and taught by Jesus.

It's the life first revealed and seen in what Jesus does, in how He lives, in what He has to say. And at its conclusion on earth, in His suffering, in His death, and then in His resurrection. In following His example, we are called to a life of repentance, of receiving God's grace and forgiveness, of beginning a whole new walk with Him, all of which He is offering the crowd and us. God grant us the grace to see that which the crowd could not see.

This is not some quick fix I can offer you. It's not some modern jump-start into a new way of being. It is engaging in a life-long process of being remade, of becoming a new person, of being drawn to fulfill the potential that God first planted in us, fulfilling all the hopes and dreams that you parents have with your babies this morning. And it all begins with a gift.

To help us understand how important we are, God freely adopts us as His children in and through our baptism. And not just ordinary children but beloved children. To us is revealed His Word, and He makes Himself present to us in the most simple and yet eternally satisfying meal – a tiny, tiny wafer and the smallest dip of wine.

Such a small meal, but so extraordinarily powerful in that through it God feeds all of our senses. As Robert Jensen, a Gettysburg professor once said, "It's the Word made visible and tangible to us. We see the bread and the wine. We hear Jesus' words of institution. We smell the aromas coming from the table. We feel the elements as we receive them. We taste them as we partake of them. And, when we receive the sacrament, in His own mysterious, unexplainable way, we internalize God with us. And in so doing, we find ourselves being drawn into a new lifestyle, given to us by God to live and called by Paul the "worthy life".

That's just like Steven, still carrying the cotton candy. He turned on his heel and strode over to the Lipnicki children. They cowered and shrank back from him, because they expected him to belt them to make up for what they'd done to his kids. But there was no hostility in what he did. He simply gave those two ragamuffins the cotton candy he had bought for his own kids, and turned around and walked away. When he got back to his own kids, his son Stu angrily asked him, "Why did you do that, Dad?" To which his father replied simply, "Because it looks as though no one had done anything nice for them for a long time."

It will be a long time before Stu figures out and understands exactly what his father has done. What he gave the Lipnicki kids was only junk food, not the food of which Jesus was speaking, yet Steven's generous act of love grew out of the very food that John talks about through Jesus in the gospel. Steven had reached out to those near him in the greatest need – two abused children, who had known little love in their short lives.

And there it is. As a congregation, we can't set ourselves up as a subcommittee to the White House to advise on foreign policy and when to enter into war and when not, but in times of war, as the children of God, we are called to love our enemies, and we're called to always pray for peace. Nor can we as a congregation, solve the world's hunger problems. But we can, as individuals, give and buy a loaf of bread, that a starving neighbor might be fed. Just so Steven did. Just so Jesus would have us do.

Perhaps we might best understand what Steven was doing and what Jesus was . . . is trying to get across in a simple story, is to tell you about an old Cherokee Indian sitting with his grandson. They were talking

about what it is to live a worthy life. "My son", the old Cherokee said, "the battle is between two 'wolves' inside each and every one of us. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other", the old man said, "is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson sat quietly for a long time, mulling over what his grandfather had said, and then looking at his grandfather, asked "Which wolf wins?" To which the old Cherokee simply replied, "The one we feed."

Amen.