

Spiritual Hunger | John 6:24-35

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What are *you* hungry for?

Today we walk into the bread of life discourse,
This extended meditation in the gospel of John.
For the next month, we'll hear the gospel writer
Circle around and around
the themes of: who Jesus is
And how Jesus loves us
by feeding us with his own self.
By offering us the very bread of life.

If Jesus is the meal and the host,
We start where every meal begins:
With hunger.

When I was 25, I found myself walking into a old stone house
On a quiet, tree-lined stretch of Whitney Avenue
In New Haven, CT.
A community garden filling the entire front lawn.
I was there to attend a Unitarian Universalist service
For the very first time.
My stomach was tight, my shoulders clenched,
And my heart raced.
It hadn't been my idea,
But I was deep, deep in a crisis of faith.
I knew I was grieving,
But looking back, I see that I was also
Profoundly spiritually hungry.

I've shared before that I was raised Roman Catholic.
And there was so much that is beautiful that Roman Catholicism gave me,
But in my early twenties,
This began to crumble.
The church's position on lgbtq people and women -
And my own lived experience -
chipped away at my belonging
And gradually,
my ability to be fed in those contexts.

Eventually I turned my anger on God.

Behind this, was the very real experience of being abandoned,
Of being cast aside by the tradition that had raised me,
That I had loved so dearly,
But in many ways had failed to love me for who I was
As a beloved child of God.
It was easier - maybe even necessary -
For me to be angry at God
Than to be angry at the church I loved so much,
And the family and friends who still worshiped in it.

At 25, the whole edifice finally collapsed
And I had a full-on crisis of faith.
Even though - or maybe, especially because I had lost my faith,
I was spiritually hungry.
Spiritually *starving*, even.

My partner at that time knew I was suffering,
They suggested that maybe we could try to find spiritual community
Outside of church.
Or at least, outside of Christianity.

In my neighborhood
I frequently walked or rode the bus
Past a sign that said
“First Unitarian Universalist Society of New Haven”

I didn't know much about UU's,
but I knew they were inclusive and democratic
And not religious in any way that was familiar to me.
So we decided to go one Sunday morning.
See how it felt.

The gathering was small.
It was painfully obvious that we were new.
Unlike plenty of other UU congregations,
I later came to realize,
There was no sanctuary.
Just an open room and a circle of chairs.
We were greeted warmly and welcomed into the circle.
The service was quiet and contemplative.
There were readings from many different religious and spiritual traditions.
Poetry, and literature.
A reflection of some kind that I don't really remember.
And when it was over,
Everyone greeted each other and went their separate ways

Into the morning.

In theory, this should have been helpful
for where I was in life.

I was curious about other traditions.

I respected the way they shared leadership and ministry,
And their political positions.

I love the inclusion of so-called secular art and literature in worship.

It was so far from the way I had worshiped before,
Dramatically different from the settings
that had hurt and excluded me.

And yet-

I was hungrier than ever.

I left feeling much the same as I had when I walked in,
Just as empty and unfulfilled,
Still adrift in my own private pain and disconnection.
I hadn't been fed.

In the gospel we just heard,

The people who have followed Jesus

To the other side of the sea

Are also spiritually hungry.

They're people on the other side of a miracle.

They've witnessed the feeding of the 5000.

They've been fed themselves.

Did they go looking for Jesus because they ate their fill?

Or because they were full in a way they hadn't been before?

Are they following him now because they saw a miracle,
or because they were satisfied?

Whatever it is, they want more.

Whatever it is, they have a sense that Jesus can give it to them.

Jesus knows them.

He knows their bellies and their hearts.

“you're looking for me, not because you saw signs,
but because you ate your fill.

Don't work for the food that fades,

but for the food that endures forever, which the Son of Man will give you.”

Even though they've been fed,

And Jesus says this,

because they are all too human,

They still ask for a sign!

This is the human way -

to have moments, experiences where God gives us our fill,
and yet to turn around and question this,

to want or need more.
He explains again, and they beg,
“Give us this bread always.”
It’s me, Jesus says.
I am the bread of life.
The simplest statement that is not simple at all.
That we’ll keep walking around over these next few Sundays
That the church has been walking around and around
For 2000 years.

As I look back, I realize that
even though I wanted nothing to do with church,
Or with Jesus at that time,
I still felt the weight of what was missing that morning.
Of being fully nourished and sharing that with others.
This is not to disparage the community I visited that day,
Or people who happily worship in those settings.
This could just as easily have been
One of many other contexts that promised
And still promises to meet *my* hunger -
Your hunger -
And failed.
During that time of my life,
I did not want to be offered the Eucharist
And yet I *needed* the Eucharist.
I couldn’t in good conscience be part of a community
Gathered at table,
And yet *I desperately needed to be part of a community gathered at table.*
Even when I was hurt, wounded, and running,
I still felt the pull.
I still experienced a spiritual hunger
Calling me to what would actually fulfill me:
Encountering God again in Jesus Christ.
Being fed by God,
with God,
With others.

Spiritual hunger can bring us to many strange places.
We grasp. We search.
Especially when we cannot or will not name
what it really is that we’re hungry for.
I wonder how many of the people in dialogue with Jesus
Expected to find themselves on the other side of the sea,
Talking with an itinerant preacher about the son of Man.

My own spiritual hunger led me to many places
other than the service that day.
Some of these places were simply false leads
that offered nothing but distraction or delay,
Others - like intensive yoga practice and...well...
divinity school -
Helped to direct me, shed more light on things,
to nudge me closer to something,
But ultimately didn't fulfill me or answer all of my questions.
Now when I remember this period of my life,
I have St. Augustine's famous words ringing in my ears:
"our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We often treat spiritual fulfillment -
the opposite of spiritual hunger -
as a special thing.
Like a luxury.
As something that we'll get around to
when we fix all of the other essential stuff.
And yet:
As he uses language to capture
Who he is and how he loves us,
The comparison Jesus uses is *bread*.
Bread is common, bread is basic.
Bread is a cornerstone of his culture's diet and many others'.
It has been the very fabric of life for so many people over so many centuries.
It's not exotic or scarce or hard to find.
Listening to our spiritual hunger,
Attending to it,
is essential.

In my own experience,
I have never been more rattled, disconnected, distracted, and unmoored
Then when I was spiritually starving.
Attending to our spiritual hunger
is maybe one of the most important things we can do
For ourselves, and for the good of our communities and relationships.

I don't want to leave you hanging
So I'll just tell you the ending:
I did make it back to church!
Back to the table,
Back to sharing bread, sharing wine
With strangers and friends.
Beckoned into this encounter

That calls us all here,
That keeps calling us back.

Over the next month,
Let's sink into this gospel together
Of who Jesus is
And how Jesus loves us
by feeding us with his own self.
By offering us the bread of life.

Jesus is the meal and the host,
And he asks us to start where every meal begins:
With hunger.
So what are you hungry for?
Where is your hunger leading you?