

For What Do We Hunger?

We are gathered here this morning with people we've known for varying lengths of time and with land that has been relationship with people for millennia. We move now into the part of our worship when we invite today's Scripture readings to illuminate our lives in both encouraging and challenging ways. Let us first pause to pray.

Spirit of God, Love that is greater than all of our fears, be very present with us as we meditate on sacred texts from long ago. Breathe a fresh word into each of our lives and into the life of our congregation. Grant us courage to welcome your voice with our whole selves. Amen.

For what do we hunger? Aided by Merriam Webster Dictionary, my working definition of hunger is to crave something – to feel an urgent need or strong desire for it. **What do you crave? For what to you feel an urgent need or strong desire?** Each of our scripture readings offers perspective and insight related to this question.

Before reaching for those insights, it feels important to speak briefly about physical hunger in our own time and space. Many of us rarely experience any significant degree of physical hunger because we benefit from food security (the status of having consistent access to food). However, many of our neighbors and some of us do live with chronic food insecurity. Recognizing that the town of Bayport is a food desert (a populated space that lacks a grocery store), our Local Outreach Team has become focused on leading our congregation in combatting food insecurity. We continue to stock the Little Free Pantry at our St Peter's building and, having secured approval from the City of Bayport, we are working toward constructing a Food Sharing Pantry outside our St. Croix United building.

We have developed the name “Food Sharing Pantry” because we want to destigmatize the economic need that some neighbors might have for supplemental groceries. By openly inviting anyone (all of us) to give and take from the pantry as opportunities and needs arise, we hope that no one will feel self-conscious or embarrassed when utilizing our Food Sharing Pantry. We are delighted to be welcoming Telae as our new Youth and Outreach Director. As one of her areas of responsibility, she will come alongside our Local Outreach Team to support and resource them as they build our food sharing ministry.

Also before reaching for insights from the ancient Israelite people in their exodus from Egypt and from Jesus as he taught his neighbors lessons about life and faith, I’d like to share with you an insight from my own journey with food. From time to time, you will hear me lift a prayer for those among us who are struggling with addiction and toward recovery. The many for whom I pray includes me. My eating habits are far from healthy and balanced. In the past ten to fifteen years, I have often wondered aloud with my family, close friends, my doctor, and my spiritual director about how I might improve my eating habits and whether or not I may have an addiction – that of compulsive overeating.

I first became curious about twelve step programs – not from experiences in my childhood, youth or college years, or even my early professional years – but in 2010, when I heard that one of my seminary professors was teaching a course on pastoral care through addiction and recovery. Fast forward a couple of years: I became further intrigued when I learned that an Overeaters Anonymous group met weekly in the building of the church where I was serving as Associate Minister in St. Paul. I recognized a longing in me for companionship with others who might deeply relate with my own struggle.

When I experienced my first sabbatical as a pastor in 2019, I tip toed into an OA group. One teaching stuck with me from my brief experience in a 12 Steps group. This statement is true for those with addictions, yet I think it also has broader capacity to resonate with many of us. We might overuse a certain substance or activity in an attempt to meet a social or emotional need that will never be met by our using of that substance or activity. I'll say that again. We might overuse a certain substance or activity in an attempt to meet a social or emotional need that will never be met by our using of that substance or activity. I have learned to be honest and curious with myself (when reaching for another scoop or handful of something edible, typically late in the evening). I can remind myself that I'm not actually physically hungry and wonder what hunger (what need or desire) I am actually attempting to meet. In my own case, I think the answer lies somewhere between recreation/fun and rest.

Before turning to our scripture readings for today, I invite you to wonder and to share aloud in a brief word or two (if you're comfortable doing so): **For what do you hunger? What do you crave, urgently need, strongly desire?** You might minister to someone else here today without knowing it by naming something aloud with courage and honesty. **For what do you hunger?** [*structure, family, connection, tools, peace, authentic relationships*] Thank you to those who shared. I encourage any of you to reach out to me if you'd appreciate some one-to-one time to share about your hunger. If anything sticks with you from today, I hope it will be this: We do all experience hunger for something, and our lives are enhanced/improved when our needs/desires/longings are met in healthy ways.

Let's take a few moments to listen again for insights the scriptures hold for us.

The Revised Common Lectionary is a 3-year schedule of biblical readings used by many Christian clergy across many denominations. There are other ways of organizing series of sermons, but I enjoy the challenge of choosing two or three texts from among the six suggested by the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary for each Sunday and leaning into the Holy Spirit to help me connect the ancient texts to our present-day human lives. Now, the Revised Common Lectionary suggested reading only ten verses of Exodus chapter sixteen. But I thought, are you kidding me!? We need to honor the people of this story by sitting with them through at least one long chapter of their frustration, misery, longing and growing pains.

One phrase (four words) stayed with me from our first reading. *"If only we had..."* began the complaint of the Israelites that they were hungry. They had recently been released from bondage and now on the move as people migrating toward what they hoped would look like freedom and prosperity. Their physical hunger pangs were paired with their longing for something else *"If only we had..."* the security of a steady source of food (definitely), but also the security of place and predictable days (even if, along with the security and predictability they had known, they had also been treated cruelly, oppressively, inhumanely).

It seems as though the Israelite people illustrate the lesson I learned from friends in Overeaters Anonymous. A hunger for one thing may indicate a deep desire or urgent need for something related but more hidden than the low hanging fruit of an obvious craving. Again, I believe this: We do all experience hunger for something, and our lives are enhanced/improved when our needs/desires/longings are met in healthy ways.

Let's hear again what the people experienced in the voice of their God – a reminder of a power greater than us, the Love that makes all things possible.

We heard, *“On the sixth day the people gathered twice as much – two measures for each person. ‘Eat it today,’ Moses counseled, ‘for today is the Sabbath of God. There is none on the ground today. For six days you are to gather it, and on the seventh day, the Sabbath, it will not be there.’ On the next day, some of them went out looking for it, but there was none. God said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my instructions? Remember, I gave you the Sabbath, and I give you food for two days on the sixth day. You are to stay where you are on the seventh day. No one is to go out on the seventh day!’ So the people rested that day.”*

The people surrendered to the strength and sustenance they could find in a life of trust and discipline.

What did Jesus say about all of this? When asked when and, really, how he had arrived to where he was in life (literally to the other side of a lake, and figuratively to being a powerfully wise rabbi), Jesus shared these thoughts:

*“‘You shouldn’t be working for **perishable** food, but for **life-giving** food that lasts for all eternity...’ Jesus said to them, ‘...my Abba gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry; no one who believes in me will be thirsty.’”*

Throughout his life, his suffering and death, and as he rises through each of us, Jesus shows us at every turn how to seek after life-giving ways, rejecting ways of division and dehumanization (which are ways that eventually perish). May we become clear about the life-giving ways for which we really hunger and pursue those because Love is counting on us. Amen.

August 4, 2024
St. Croix United Church @ People's Park
Exodus 16:2-30, John 6:24-35