



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Holy Hunger

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

March 23, 2014

I was getting into the back of the truck in front of the house where we stayed in Gros Morne, up in the northern part of Haiti. The team was gathering for our ride out to one of the remote villages where we would set up a clinic for the day. And there he was, looked to be about nine years old, eyes bigger than his head, very thin, with the familiar round marks of ringworm on his scalp. He was so hungry and he just looked at me, in all of my well fed glory, wondering if I would do anything for him. No one else from the group was watching as I dug into the bag that held our lunch for later that day. I pulled out a roll and gave it to him. He looked at it for a moment and I could tell he was thinking about maybe saving it or part of it for later but he couldn't. He ate it so fast; I think he barely chewed the bread. He had no choice; the demands of his hungry little body over-ruled any ability to think beyond his empty stomach.

Last year, we sent money to the village of Kayimet for school uniforms for many of the children, particularly for the earthquake orphans who have no family to provide such things. We sent \$2800 and told the community to use the extra money for whatever the school needed. I assumed that they might pay teacher salaries or get school supplies, but I learned this year that they bought food because that was what they really needed. Most of the people in the villages we visit are hungry most of the time.

How often do we say, "Oh, I'm starving!" I see their faces when I think I'm hungry and it puts it all in perspective. What I am really saying is, what am I going to eat and how soon - I have so many options. Our nation faces a different kind of starvation - too many Americans feed themselves with food that does not really nourish. The American diet has gone haywire quick, in my lifetime. Prepared, fast foods have taken over. It all sounded like a good time saving idea, but it has turned out to be really bad stewardship of our bodies. Fortunately, we are beginning to recognize the harm that we are doing to ourselves. A quick trip through an ingredient list on any box will reveal shocking things. Ingredients that are too complex to pronounce, let alone recognize as food from God's garden. A lot of it just plain making us sick. But for many people, this food is seen as the only way to feed a family because it's cheap. We're starving ourselves even though we have lots to eat.

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Hunger and thirst in the Bible are always talked about on two levels at once. In today's story from Exodus, the people were thirsty and hungry. They had followed Moses out of slavery and into the desert. And now they were scared. Who could blame them? The hunger they faced was like the hunger in Haiti, or out on the Crow reservation. The next meal is always uncertain. Most of us don't know that kind of hunger but when you have seen it it's hard to wipe the image from your mind. There's a desperation that can't be satisfied except by food. It takes precedence over other needs. Until people are fed, they can do little to succeed in life. Moses knew that they weren't going any further without water and food. Of course, the story isn't about how people were fed miraculously in the desert, it's about learning to trust God and understanding what truly gives us life.

That's what the woman at the well learned from Jesus. There's water that can come up from a well in a bucket; it quenches physical thirst. But as Jesus points out, that thirst comes back. Spiritual hunger and thirst can't be satisfied with soda and fast food. Natural healthy food and clean water are good for our bodies. The truths that Jesus taught to the woman at the well and us about love and community are healthy for our souls. What does it feel like to hunger for such food and water?

In the 1980s, a spiritual tremor began in the US and around the world. People began to search for meaning and deep connection. They often looked outside of the church. Book store shelves were suddenly filled with a tidal wave of books on spirituality, angels, heaven, life after death, prayer, meditation. By the early 1990s, Publisher's Weekly didn't know what to do with all this, so they hired Phyllis Tickle as the first editor of the Religion Department. They'd never had such a department before because there hadn't been a need. In her down home, southern way, Phyllis says "you couldn't swing a cat in a book store without hitting something about angels or Irish saints!"

It was a good thing, this awakening to hunger. But because there was a market for it, not everything that was published was nourishing. All sorts of junk food spirituality flooded the market, self-help books promising ten easy steps to bliss, perfect peace, for a small price. It requires the same kind of discernment as reading the labels on our food. It's good to be hungry for God, but don't settle for what my friend Carrie Newcomer calls "religious cornflakes." Hold out for green peas from the garden and herbs that smell like perfume when they're crushed.

I have a wonderful little book called *God Hunger; Discovering the Mystic in All of Us*. Author John Kirvan says, "We are beginning to realize that we hunger for God and that for too long we have settled for too little. This basic, primal hunger for God may be the least recognized and acknowledged aspect of today's highly publicized spiritual quest and our own personal journeys.

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We want what the great mystics sought and found - not an occasional comforting word, but a perspective-shattering glimpse of God, not one more promise of bliss in ten days and ten steps but a here-and-now taste of eternity. Nothing less will satisfy this hunger, too long denied."

What we ultimately seek is an experience of God, not someone else's story of it. The pursuit of the nourishing presence of God takes us on our journey in which we meet our true selves, catalogue our baggage and leave most of it by the side of the road. We learn to distinguish between food that is good for us and that which is simply easy and pleasing to our most primal taste buds.

The lovely thing is that food can be a sacrament for our journey. You know the definition of a sacrament; an outward and visible sign of an inward invisible grace. Good food that nourishes is connected to its source. It has not been contaminated with drugs and chemicals or turned into science experiments. Good spiritual nourishment is not salvation from the microwave. Good food of both kinds deserves time and attention. I had an awesome experience with food recently. I hadn't made bread in a long time but really felt the need to do so. Partially to have some bread that I knew was wholesome and partially as a spiritual exercise. The kneading of bread is like Tai Chi. So I bought my ingredients and went to work. I mixed it in my big mixer and then turned it out onto the counter and began to knead, which is such a wonderful, muscular activity. As I pushed the heels of my hands down into the dough, I prayed. I kneaded love into the bread. I probably overworked the dough because I was so carried away with what I was doing. The loaves went into the oven and eventually produced that heavenly aroma. I was so glad I'd done it. We started cutting slices off for sandwiches and toast. At one point, Peter grabbed the bread knife and cut off a good big slab and revealed a perfect heart shaped hole in the middle of the bread. My bread was talking to me. I put love into something and it was given back to me. I knew that I had been hungry for the physical bread. Like the Israelites and the woman at the well, I was given more than I had requested. I thought it was food and it turned out to be grace.

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