



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Hunger We Want Never to Lose

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 21, 2013

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 10:38-42

Over the last several weeks I have had the occasion to ask a group of people to identify where each sees spiritual hunger in the world. Sometimes with great eloquence, always with genuine conviction, often in many words and examples and occasionally in just a couple, the eventual answer is the same: it exists everywhere, all around us. I believe they are correct. Poor people have it; rich people have it. People who seem to be on top of the world have it, and those whose despair is obvious to a casual passerby have it. No amount of frivolity or over-indulgence can hide it. In fact, such often highlight it: spiritual hunger is rampant.

The hunger manifests itself differently, of course, for each of us. It can be the life channeling and sustaining nudge that keeps us tuned into, turned toward God, present among the highly religious, like many of us; and—let's be honest—it also can be found, this strangely nourishing kind of hunger, among some who never darken the door of a church but whose journey to God is focused and meaningful. Fundamentalism is also a response to spiritual hunger, just as whatever the opposite of fundamentalism is. The desire to be religious, I think, always starts out good; it just gets more complicated as the difference between religiosity and that for which we truly spiritually yearn gets farther apart.

The two snippets of ancient scripture we have heard today, both well worn in the world of biblical story telling, have something to do with spiritual hunger. The epic of Abraham and Sarah, mythical and fantastical in its scope, is an archetypal story for us, an early stab at explaining the desire of humans to connect with God and to recognize the surprise that God desires relationship with us as well. Its telling and retelling, filled with many twists and turns, highs and lows of human majesty and frailty, begin to teach us that God lives and moves among us in the most ordinary ways. God, we realize early in the story, is a God who comes close, moving and speaking through the words and actions of regular people, even strangers, sometimes suddenly appearing in our midst. And the power of God, we begin to see, is more likely to be found in the everyday, rather than the special, like an old couple, long resigned to be childless, ridiculously conceiving and bringing a son into the world. A relationship, a covenant, is established between God and humankind. And the journey begins, now perceived as a journey of hunger and satiation, of seeking and finding, of losing and discovering again. No set way guarantees a successful journey, no one personality style dominates another in the search for God; there is before each of us a path toward fulfillment, which we must follow to find what the world cannot give.

The second story tells of Luke's imagining of a moment in the life of Jesus with his friends, Mary and Martha, who are—in a world of few details—oddly well-known, meeting them as we do a couple of times. Humbly I wonder if this might better have been a story left unimagined. It is hard to win whichever way this moral is preached. One feminist take on it is that Mary is elevated in the story by being portrayed as a devoted disciple, sitting at the feet of Jesus, being unbound for a moment from the shackles of ordinary women's work, which so occupied the mind of the ever-active Martha. Another angle sees Jesus as dismissive of Martha's worth in the household order. The temptation to focus on these two caricatures, known so well to us, one or the other often inhabited by each of us, results in our spending time arguing about which is the better part, supporting almost universally the role each of us normally assumes. The Jesus Seminar scholars suggest the inclusion of the story, juxtaposed as it is just after the story of the Good Samaritan (the perfect example of the commandment to love neighbor as self), is to illustrate the other part of the Great Commandment—to love God with heart, soul and mind, presuming as we do that Mary's beatific devotion qualifies as

such. Perhaps. But maybe not. My other side, the practical, active side, thinks not, claiming that Jesus only loved Mary better until he got really hungry for lunch.

In earlier iterations of myself as a preacher, I gave passionate sermons, commending the contemplative over the active. Now I leave such fine points of interpretation to others, believing, as I do, that we really can't know exactly what Jesus said here. And that the real importance of the story is to show us the depth of spiritual hunger, evident in smitten devotion like Mary's, in active work like Martha's, and in many ways in between. That is what matters, not how we go about filling it.

Someone this week sent me a blog from a site called *The Christian Pundit*, which claims that kids who have grown up in large non-denominational Protestant churches are in early adulthood leaving such congregations in favor of something much more liturgical and mysterious, their spiritual hunger taking them away, the article argues, from the barrenness of certainty to the awe of sacramental worship. The blogger claims that these kids are "looking for something the world can't give them. The world can give them hotter jeans, better coffee, bands, speakers, and book clubs than a congregation can. What it can't give them is theology; membership in a group that transcends time, place and race; a historic rootedness; something greater than themselves." Other studies show that the most significant movement in religious practice among young adults is toward becoming one of the "nones"—one with no organized religious affiliation. I find neither the former example exhilaratingly hopeful nor the latter desperately disturbing—for each represents the presence and urgency of spiritual hunger. And while there is no guarantee that each of us will ever satiate the need, its very presence in our lives argues for the potential power of real union with God.

The common denominator of the search, the desire to fill the spiritual hunger, is the yearning for authenticity, for answers of course, but more than that, yearning to admit that none of us knows the precise answer. Even my bold claim that God is the answer, which with all my heart I believe, is barely enough for me and almost untranslatable to a young person attempting to make sense of real life questions about jobs and relationships, let alone what any of it means.

Yesterday in over 100 cities around the country people gathered to protest the Zimmerman trial. Not all were clear about what they were protesting. Some readily admitted that the legal system dictated the decision but that it had left them unsettled and disturbed; many outright claimed that another egregious racial injustice had occurred. I know what they feel, for I feel it in my own heart: a deep yearning, a spiritual hunger, for the society which I still believe we could become. It is not a new dream; in fact, it has been the dream of the people of God for a long, long time. The words of the prophet Amos still sound both hope and judgment: God make ours a society in which "justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." That, my brothers and sisters, is a dream we must never lose—for its presence in our souls shapes us, keeps us from being too comfortable and too satisfied and reminds us of that for which we truly hunger.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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