

“Cravings”
John 6:23-27a, 33-35
11th Sunday after Pentecost

August 4, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

It’s so good to be back with all of you today.

And I’m happy to report that my surgery last month, as well as the past 6 weeks of recovery—it’s all gone extremely well.

Now I won’t be running any marathons in the near future...or in any kind of future...but my hip sure does feel better than it’s felt at any time during the past two or three years.

So let me begin today by offering a very heart-felt thank you. In my 26 years of ministry, I’ve never been out for 7 straight weeks.

Thank you to my splendid colleagues—to Leigh, to Mary Kathleen, to Lauren, to Terri, to Marlon, to Cara—not just for holding down the fort, but for doing such an outstanding job, with worship, with pastoral care, with the daily life of our church, while I’ve been out these past two months.

And thank you to our newest colleague, to Nick, for accepting the call to come here this summer and jumping right in, one week after all y’all voted him in!

And thank you to y’all—for all the support that you gave me while I was out. Thank you for your prayers, for the cards, for the texts, thank you for the delicious meals that were dropped off at our house...whether I was joining you on Sundays via our Livestream, or reading a note that one of you had sent when I sat down to breakfast, y’all fed me during my recovery in more ways than you may ever know.

Do you know what that experience is like?
The experience of being fed?

I know you do.
It's one of the greatest gifts that anyone can give another person.
Being fed physically—emotionally—spiritually...there's nothing
like it.

To be fed with food. To be fed with knowledge.
To be fed with companionship. To be fed with love.

We all need it.
And that's what Jesus talks about in our text for today.

In the 6th chapter of John, Jesus says this:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be
hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

It is a text about being fed.
But truth be told, I've always found this text to be a very
perplexing passage.

It's one of a series of metaphors that Jesus uses to describe himself
in John's Gospel.

There are seven “I am” statements that Jesus makes.

In Chapter 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd...”
That's easy enough to understand.
We are the sheep, Jesus is our shepherd, the one who leads us and
looks after us and finds for us when we get lost...I get that.

In Chapter 15, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches...”
That's not rocket science.

Without Jesus, without the connection we have to Jesus and the growth we get from Jesus and our connection to one another, the church will wither away...

Today's passage is the first of these "I am" statements.

Jesus says "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry..."

STOP RIGHT THERE.

This is where I get stuck.

See, I've followed Jesus my entire life—well, almost my entire life. I was baptized when I was four, and I don't have many memories of my life before that...although I do recall watching a Yankees game on tv with my father when I was 3.

I'll leave it to you which came first:
My love for the Yankees, or my love for Jesus!

But I digress.

I've followed Jesus as far back, basically, as I can remember...
and yet MY hunger has never gone away.

I don't mean physical hunger.
I've never had to suffer from true physical hunger.
I hope you haven't either.

And make no mistake.

As followers of Jesus, it is our duty to help feed those who do suffer from true hunger. School starts for GCS this week, hard to believe...did you know that 53% of the students in GCS are eligible for

free or reduced meals because otherwise, those students would be hungry?¹

As Christians, it is our responsibility to alleviate food insecurity. But that's not the hunger I'm talking about today.

How about emotional hunger?
How about spiritual hunger?
Do you know about this hunger?

Shortly before his too-early death, the French novelist Albert Camus frequently attended the American Church in Paris. He even discussed the possibility of baptism with the pastor there:

“The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing...”²

Do you see what we're talking about?
Camus knew about the hunger.

Years ago, the British newspaper columnist Bernard Levin wrote the following in an op-ed piece:

“Countries like ours [Great Britain, the U.S.] are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire...and yet [we] lead lives of quiet...desperation, understanding...that there is a hole inside...

¹ Savannah Moss, The Greenville News, November 1, 2023: [Greenville County residents widely affected by food insecurity issues \(greenvilleonline.com\)](https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/local/2023/11/01/greenville-county-residents-widely-affected-by-food-insecurity-issues/704124700270001).

² Quoted in *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey*, by Michael Lindvall, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. The original quote comes from Howard Mumma, “Conversations with Camus,” in *The Christian Century*, June 7, 2000.

“...that however much food and drink [we] pour into it, however [much stuff we] stuff into it, however many well balanced children and loyal friends [we] parade around the edges of it...[that hole] aches.”³

I think Bernard Levin knew about the hunger.
Do you know about this hunger?

As the retired pastor Michael Lindvall puts it:

“What the world names success cannot altogether satisfy the hunger—not the career, not the great house, not the one-in-a-million apartment, not the grown-up toys, not the retirement investments, not the hobby, not even family. Sweet as it all may be, it cannot quench this particular thirst.”⁴

Do you know what he’s talking about?

It’s a space in our souls.
A hole in our hearts.
A hunger that we can never quite satisfy.

It comes in different shapes, different sizes, and is something different for every person.

Maybe it’s reconciliation with a member of your family. More than anything, you crave understanding, you crave forgiveness, you crave a new start with this person you love so dearly.

Or maybe for some of you, it’s permission you seek. The freedom to stop beating yourself up for a mistake you made long ago. This mistake has haunted your past. It’s controlled your memory and your mind. And you hear the good news of the gospel every Sunday—In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!—but you can’t be sure it’s true for you.

³Quoted by Michael Lindvall in *A Geography of God*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

And what you really hunger for is for those words to penetrate your defenses, and set you free.

Maybe what you crave is not about you.
It's about someone else.

It's healing and stability and direction for someone you care about, and you've been trying to help this person solve their problem for years, and as hard as you try, you're never able to "fix" their problems for them.

Has anyone here ever tried to fix someone else's problem for them?

How did that go??

We all have our cravings.
And they're not silly. And they're not superficial.
Each of us is hungry for something.
Some empty space inside us that we can never...fill...on our own.

For my entire life, I've always treated that emptiness as a problem to be solved. A hole that needs to be filled as quickly as I can make it happen.

But what if, instead of treating it as a problem to be solved,
we accepted it and made our peace with it...
as God's strange gift?

A gift that reminds us, every day, that our lives are not our own?

A gift that brings us back, every day, to our dependence on God's love and our need to be fed by God's grace?

The Rev. Dr. John Boyle was a Presbyterian pastor who was on the staff of 4th Presbyterian Church in Chicago for many years. Dr. Boyle's call to ministry was shaped during WWII. Shaped not as much by hearing a word spoken to him, but by the ABSENCE of words...
the SILENCE that he witnessed,
when he was with the Army's 42nd Rainbow
Division in that war.

He described it this way:

“The call I had responded to was the call of silence—the silence of corpses in railroad boxcars...the silence...of disease [and] starvation...in...Dachau, Germany.... Later on I concluded that the silence to which I had responded was for me the call of God.”

Boyle describes the day he and his division helped liberate the concentration camp at Dachau.

“I saw him out of the corner of my eye,” Boyle recalled.

“[He was] walking toward me on that cold day in April, 1945...

“...I noticed his tear-stained face as [he said]
‘Danke, danke.’

“Thank you, thank you.”

“Then this Lithuanian Jew,
who had been a prisoner [there] for over three years,
reached into the pocket of his threadbare shirt.

“Out of his pocket he slowly brought forth a dirty looking crust of bread and held it out to me. I took it and he told me
that on the day before

his friend gave it to him...

Now this man was giving me what had been given him,
so as to show his gratitude.

I thanked him and put the crust of bread in the pocket of my field jacket, where it stayed for several weeks. From time to time, I would finger it, as though it were a talisman of some sort.

It soon was reduced to crumbs.

Then one day, as I sat on a bench [outside] the cathedral in Salzburg, Austria, I emptied the crumbs into my hand,
stared at them for a minute,
and fed them to the pigeons gathered round my feet.

Boyle went on:

“Over the course of nearly sixty years in ministry,
I have officiated at and participated in
...the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper
more times than I can remember.”

And what has fed me every time, he recalls,
is the memory of “that survivor of the Holocaust...”

The EXTRAORDINARY GENEROSITY of that man at that moment.

It was “a dirty looking crust of bread...it was all he had to give...

“It was enough. It was more than enough.
I have been feeding off...the leftovers

[of those crumbs] ever since.⁵

Friends, I hope that sometime during the past 15 minutes, you've thought about the gift of being fed.

That there is no gift quite like it in the world.

That's why we're offering a Krispy Kreme donut after worship.

Enjoy it. Savor it.

We hope it will tide you over until lunch.

But the bread that Christ offers at his table?

The bread of life that you will hold in your hands in just a moment—that sliver of God's grace?

It won't just tide you over.

It will carry you through your life.

It will be more than enough.

Amen.

⁵ From two sermons preached by the Rev. Dr. John Boyle: "When God Challenges Us," August 3, 2008, and "The Future of Futility," May 9, 2010, at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois.