

I had a parishioner at St. Aidan's who as a Rancher, Lawyer, Author, Mother, and School Board Member, was an eloquent, well-educated advocate for many causes. One of those dearest to her heart was sustainable agriculture and sustainable cattle raising, and she traveled all over the country giving talks showing how cattle, far from being the demons of global warming, if raised correctly, were on the side of renewal. By grazing and turning over the soil, cattle sequestered carbon and kept grasslands and their soils healthy by performing the same ecological functions as any wild herbivore. At one point, when she was actively campaigning, (when last we were together, her fine mind had turned to little league, at which both of her boys excelled), she returned from a conference in the Midwest. When I asked how it had gone, she said, with both astonishment and compassion, "The factory farmers really believe they are doing good, that they are feeding a crowded and hungry world which could not be fed in any other way."

She looked at me in such a way that I could see her respect for the farmers' position, their pride in doing a hard, but necessary job, but I could also feel her disagreement with them: one of her first causes was busting the pork industry, the cruelty inflicted on the factory farmed animals, and the wanton pollution of animal waste flowing into rivers and streams. As I listened, I wondered how life, nourishment, duty, and cruelty could get so mixed up. Must a sentient being experience agony so that I can eat a hamburger? Has Old MacDonald been reduced to running an animal concentration camp? Is the good life even possible when its cost is so much suffering? Do we have the right to hurt someone to get what we want? Although I'm an omnivore by nature, there's got to be a better way. This is the same question Nicholas Kristoff raises in this week's Sunday Times. We treat our dogs like people but eat animals whose entire lives have been unmitigated suffering. If we are what we eat, think about the pain we ingest.

Hunger lies at the root of all life and all suffering. As babies, one of our first acts is to drink our mother's milk. Life. We cry when we need more. Suffering. In the world of physical nourishment and physical health, I eat a meal. Six hours later I'm hungry again. Sometimes I'm hungry for no reason. I exercise regularly, and it may lengthen my life, but it does not confer the satisfaction of physical immortality. As if this were not enough, our entire culture keeps us in a state of restless longing: a perfect home, a perfect government, a perfect body, a perfect church. My rancher friend received death threats from crazed vegans. Who would ever think that eating only vegetables could turn someone murderous? Maybe factory farming brings out the rage of corn and soybeans. Which is to say, as we look at today's readings, hunger has always been an issue and it is an issue in the Bible. We are far from the first people to worry about diet, or about who gets to eat what. Or what it really means to eat. In our Old Testament Lesson, it is interesting that Nathan uses the image of a dinner guest to call out David's adultery and murder. Nathan tells a parable of the rich man with many flocks and the poor man with his single ewe lamb which he loves like a child. When unexpected guests arrive, the rich man is so stingy that he takes the poor man's little lamb to feed his guests because he doesn't want to disturb his own flock for mere hospitality. In the way of parables, this one shows us the relationship between hunger and greed. Moving to our gospel, we find ourselves in the aftermath of one of history's greatest displays of hospitality and generosity, when Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Turns out that this, too, is not enough. The crowd follows Jesus to the other side of the sea. They want more. But Jesus only says, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

What in the world could that food possibly be? Jesus tells me to trust him. I do, but I still need dinner.

As I said, few things bedevil us more than our cravings. We have to eat to stay alive, but hunger still makes us restless. God gave David everything he could possibly want, but it was not enough: David, the so-called Good Shepherd, took his neighbor's beloved lamb to satisfy a transient craving. It solved nothing. Even when David repented and was forgiven, there were consequences: "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." My sins are visited upon those around me, because those around me see what I have done. They mistake being forgiven with getting away with it and they try it, too.

In one of the texts I read in seminary, The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World, Monika Hellwig describes hunger as one of the world's most potentially barbarous privations. A starving person, if they have the strength, has been known to kill for a bite of bread.

To which Jesus answers:

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

This simple saying holds such a depth of meaning that we could be here all day and still not get to the bottom of it. The Bible as we have it peppers its earthy, physical stories with sayings like these, making it difficult to reach beneath purely physical explanations. It can be very hard to trust God when one is afraid they do not have enough money to pay their bills or

food to feed their children. Even the disciples are clueless. Consider this conversation from Matthew' gospel, which also takes place after feeding a multitude:

5 When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, 'Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' ⁷They said to one another, 'It is because we have brought no bread.' ⁸And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, 'You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!' (Matt 16:5-11) How can Jesus not be talking about bread when he is so clearly talking about bread?

This is where the sayings gospels, like Thomas, can be helpful. They lift the teachings out of the stories. They give us an encounter with Jesus, not in the First Century, but in the now.

As I said last Sunday, although God loves us without condition, our actions still carry consequences. That is because everything we do is at some level creative, or better, generative. Our choices, whether wise or unwise, generate possibilities for future choices. The yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees has nothing to do with bread, but with what rises up in them: in this case, false teachings. False teachings claim to nourish us, but they will never satisfy.

Getting back to a much earlier metaphor, if I am a vegan making death threats at a rancher, it's because I am still, at heart, a carnivore, feeding upon the vulnerabilities of others, seeking yeast to puff myself up. Or as the Gospel of Thomas says in a saying we'll be looking at more closely in a week or so:

“6 1 His followers asked him: “Do you want us to fast? In what way should we fast? Should we give alms? What foods should we not eat?” 2 Jesus said, “Do not tell lies and do not do what you hate. 3 For all things are revealed before the presence of heaven.””

Do not do what you hate. Do not tell lies. Only the truth will set us free. It’s right before our eyes if we only learn to see. More to come. Amen.