

On My Watch
John 6:35, 41-51; Psalm 130
First Sunday of 2018-19 MPC Worship Season

Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

²LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand?

⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

⁶my soul waits for the LORD

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

John 6:35, 41-51

³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me **will never be hungry,**

and *whoever* believes in me **will never be thirsty....”**

⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves.

⁴⁴“No one *can* come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

⁴⁵“It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall *all* be taught by God.’¹

“*Everyone* who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. (⁴⁶Not that anyone has *seen* the Father, except the one who is from God; he *has* seen the Father.)

⁴⁷“Very truly, I tell you, *whoever* believes has eternal life.

⁴⁸“I am the bread of life.

⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

⁵¹I am the *living* bread that came down from heaven.

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;

and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Prayer

God of rich food and clean water;

God of those with empty stomachs and emaciated bodies,
and those who weep and worry for their hungry children;

God of peace and comfort, acceptance and affirmation;

God of those with aching hearts,
absorbed by fear and emptiness;

we lift up to you the hunger inherent in being human—
our hunger for righteousness and love,
and the physical hunger suffered by so many.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

*My soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

We recognize the poetic luxury of using the word “hunger”
to talk about our desire for righteousness to reign in this world—
let alone the license to use it to describe vocational aspirations,
or romantic inclinations,
or any other philosophical or spiritual desires,
especially in a world where every hour a thousand persons die
as a result of preventable malnutrition,
and where food deprivation is used as a tool
of domination and subservience,
by governments and bureaucracies and domestic abusers.

All of our hungers, O God, are so real, and so acute,
and the fact that our problems tend to be first-world problems
doesn't make them any less problematic.

We know that we must turn to you for our sustenance.

Help us also to know that others must be able
to rely on us; and teach us, we pray,
to serve and feed the world as you did,
and you do for us every day, even at this very moment.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The Sermon

She stares into her coffee cup, watching the cream swirling around but
not really seeing anything.

Some days she is just so tired of the degrading comments, the catcalls,
the infantilizing assumptions about what she wants out of work and life
and friendships.

Like every woman she knows, she's got Me Too stories that she never
shares. And she's got a story about the time she realized the pay
discrepancy, went to what she was sure were sympathetic ears, and when
she told what she knew, was immediately drowned out by a chorus from

both the men and the women around her of “I’m so sick of all this political correctness.”

The first stanza of John O’Donohue’s poetic prayer-blessing “A Morning Offering” begins, as if the first thought someone might have upon waking up in the morning after a night full of dreams:

I bless the night that nourished my heart
To set the ghosts of longing free,
Into the flow and figure of dream
That went to harvest from the dark
Bread for the hunger no one sees.ⁱⁱ

It is a bracing thought for me when I realize that from the moment I look in the mirror in the morning, every human being I see throughout the day is someone who is hungry for something.

Acceptance, Affirmation, appreciation;
success—whatever that might mean;
a compelling reason to keep holding out hope.

Each of us has a hunger for something.

John tells us that the crowd that kept following Jesus did so “because they saw the signs he was doing for the sick.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If they’re able to keep up with the apparent wanderings of Jesus and his disciples, they must be people who are not too ill to travel and move around, but it’s the signs they see him doing for the sick that compel them. Maybe they have family members at home who are sick.

And since, as John says, they “keep” following him, they must be people who have time available, and nothing else to lose—no employment demanding their presence, and anxious enough to give this much commitment of effort and time to a desperate pursuit.

He may be the last hope of those without financial resources, who have at least one sick or suffering child, or spouse, or parent depending on them.

They also bring with them the layered anguishes of being an occupied people, excluded from the segments of the economy that could provide for real security and stability, on top of being ill themselves or having family members to take care of.

What does it mean to them, the ones in this crowd for whom this is physically a life and death situation, when Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry?”

It doesn't seem like they're looking for a philosophical response to a vaguely spiritual hunger.

They come to him as people who have already learned,
through soul-crushing experience,
that they should just expect, always,
to be physically hungry and thirsty.

Their access to water and food is permanently restricted by events that may have taken place generations ago, and that no one now living sees any need to rectify:

military dominance,
followed by extraction of resources
by occupying or corrupt powers,
and the imposition of strict limits
on the people's ability to escape
or rise above the circumstances in which they are left.

So they, and their parents and grandparents before them, have learned to expect to be hungry and thirsty. It's just the way of the world.

And Jesus says: Not on my watch.

“*Whoever* comes to me will never be hungry.”

Not just the ones of resources and power and advantage.

“*Whoever* believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Not on my watch. That is not the way of the world that I bring.

No wonder the theocratic authorities complained when Jesus said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

They said, “That guy isn’t a loaf of bread from heaven; he’s that guy, right?—you know, Joseph’s son. I mean come on, we know his father and mother. He didn’t come “down from heaven;” he’s from, like, Weaverville or somewhere.”

And Jesus said to them,

Don’t complain among yourselves.

These people, and anybody else who comes to me,
could only have done that if they were drawn to me
by the God who sent me.

And *whoever* they are, I will raise them up on the last day.

Whoever they are, I will save them.

No matter if they’re the lowest of the dregs at the bottom of society,
the *lowliest* caste, the ones regarded as
the *most* unwelcome,
the ones whom comfortable people think they wish didn’t exist,
so they could just go back to understanding the world
in terms of black and white—
as in, this color here, that color there,
with *us* living in secure abundance,
and *they* being condemned to squalor and corruption...

Jesus said, No. They don't have to be hungry, either—starting now.

“Whoever comes to me will never be *hungry*,” he said in John’s Greek, using the same word for “hunger” that shows up all over the New Testament, that means exactly what it says in an absolutely physical sense.^{iv}

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...” (Matthew 25:35).

Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he *hungered*—he “was famished” in the New Revised Standard Version (Matthew 4:2).

When Jesus and his disciples came from Bethany, he was hungry; and he went to a fig tree but there was nothing but leaves, and in his physical *hunger*, his disciples heard him curse that tree, even though figs weren't even supposed to be in season yet (Mark 11:12-14).

In Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome, he quotes the dominant translation of Proverbs at the time (25:21-22): “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” To which Paul immediately provides his own commentary: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20-21).

You overcome evil with good by feeding your enemies when they are hungry.

Which sounds to me like hunger itself is evil—not the philosophical kind of hunger, but the physical hunger that leads to bodily starvation—regardless of whether it’s experienced by your closest family members or your worst enemies. It is just evil, and it is to be overcome with food.

Which would mean that food that answers hunger is good. Even in regard to your least favorite people on earth.

And Jesus says, “*Whoever* comes to me *will never* be hungry,” and “*Whoever* believes in me *will never* be thirsty.”

Daryl Davis is an R&B piano player who has played with people like Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, B. B. King, and many others. He is also African American, and Christian.^v

For decades, Daryl Davis has initiated friendships—not strategic conversation partnerships, but *friendships*—with members of white supremacist groups, especially the Klan.

There are years’ worth of stories of haters meeting with Davis,
and being at first confused at what they were looking at,
and then disarmed by his grace and friendliness,
and drawn in by his stance of listening.

He has said repeatedly that he’s not trying to convert anybody, just listen to them.

In the course of listening and assuming a stance of building friendship, he often ends up materially helping them—bringing the children of a convict to the prison so they could visit their father; sending gifts; sitting next to them in court, and standing alongside them as counter-protesters accost both the white nationalists and Davis himself, whose open stance they find appalling.

“It’s going to plant a seed,” he says of the loving, dangerous, Christian mission that he takes on again and again and again. “The seed may not blossom today, tomorrow, the next day,” he says, “but eventually it will come out, because the truth never can, never can never be squashed.”^{vi}

Bread for the hunger no one sees.

For all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
in a world that is just starving for it,
God speaks and moves and feeds our deepest,
most frightened and hopeful and precarious hungers
in many ways,
but often most visibly and viscerally
through relationships between people:
between friends, between enemies,
between the howling stomachs and weary feet
of a desperate crowd
and the human hands of Jesus and his disciples.

And just as God meets our aching hunger for peace and justice
and mercy and righteousness
through the calling and equipping of disciples,

God also meets head-on the spectre of starvation that haunts the world
by putting you and me into the world:
flawed followers of Christ, to be Jesus' open hands,
seeing to it that everyone has access to food.

I will make people in my image, he says,
who for that reason will give as I give,
will share as I have shared,
will love unconditionally as I love,
and will refuse to let a neighbor go hungry.

And I will teach them that they are all neighbors—
not some who are benefactors and some who are receivers,
as if human life was all meant to be some transaction,
but *neighbors*, dependent upon one another
and dependent on the strength the whole community,
dependent on their God to provide enough,
and on each other to distribute food

as if no one had power over another,
people put here with one another
to make sure that every single neighbor has enough to eat,
and that no child of mine would ever go to bed hungry.
And they will know that all children are mine.

I will call my Church to be the body of Christ,
so that when Jesus is no longer there in the flesh
to be the living bread from heaven for them,
they would become living bread for the world in his name.

Far up the Ba Na hill near Danang city in Vietnam is a new walkway structure called the Golden Bridge. It's a track, painted gold, supported in part by two giant stone hands that extend from the mountainside.

If you look at your hands, and turn your palms up, imagine holding a gently curving track in your two outstretched hands, and imagine about 30 people standing on the track on each of your palms. That's the scale of the structure they've built.

The architects said they wanted it to look like—in their words—“giant hands of Gods, pulling a strip of gold out of the land.”^{vii}

But those of us who believe that God has been revealed in the open hands of Jesus see that breathtakingly beautiful architectural work with a different perspective.

It's not the strip of gold we notice;
it's the hands turned *upward* and *open*,
to hold whoever may come,
all the unpredictable kinds of people
with backgrounds from all over the world;
hands that don't discriminate based on what you look like
or where you come from;
don't ask you for an explanation or demand your papers

or send you one way, and your parents or your children another;
don't threaten your life if you're seen here after dark;
don't tell you how terrible or dumb or unworthy you are
for the way you think.

We notice the hands reaching *out* and *up*,
and although they induce awe because of their scale—
and because, by design, they look ancient and weathered,
as if they'd been there for millennia—
their attitude is welcoming, and sturdy as mountain stone.

It's the hands held out that we notice,
reaching out as if to offer bread to the whole world.

Tom Long recently said he thought the Apostles' Creed has the
chronology in the right order: "I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth." He said, "God was a parent before God was
a creator, and the creation was generated not by the loneliness and need
of God, but out of deep parental love."^{viii}

The kind of love that parents have
that will stop at nothing to be sure that their children are fed,
and will not stand for the thought that someone else's children
will go to bed hungry tonight.

The kind of love that God showed us in Jesus Christ
when he said,
"I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

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August 12, 2018

ⁱ Isaiah 54:13

ⁱⁱ John O'Donohue, "A Morning Offering," in O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 6:2

^{iv} ὁ ἐρχόμενος πρὸς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ πεινάσῃ

^v Kenneth R. Morefield, "An African American Confronts the Klan in Accidental Courtesy" *Christianity Today*, March 24, 2016

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/march-web-only/african-american-confronts-klan-in-accidental-courtesy.html>)

^{vi} Mallory Simon, "How the Klansman who shot toward a black man in Charlottesville ended up at the African-American Museum" *CNN* Updated 9:09 PM ET, Fri August 10, 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/10/us/kkk-imperial-wizard-charlottesville/index.html>). See also Mallory Simon and Sara Sidner, "What happened when a Klansman met a black man in Charlottesville" *CNN* Updated 7:46 PM ET, Sat December 16, 2017

(<https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/15/us/charlottesville-klansman-black-man-meeting/index.html>)

^{vii} Kham Nguyen, Thinh Nguyen, "Handy engineering: Vietnam's 'Golden Bridge' has giant support" *Reuters "Lifestyle"* August 1, 2018, 5:00 AM

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-bridge/handy-engineering-vietnams-golden-bridge-has-giant-support-idUSKBN1KM48D>)

^{viii} Thomas G. Long, "The Love of God" (*Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2017*), 19.