

11 Pentecost

Proper 14

12 Aug 2012

I don't know about you, but sometimes it really seems to me that St Paul places a pretty tall order for us. His letter that we've read today tells us to do things and act in such a way that, well, for all intents and purposes is just about impossible in my life.

Some of it's easy enough. I don't think I ever slander anyone. But, I have to admit many, many nights that I've let the sun go down on my anger.

But when he tells us to "Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another", I have to think he might be asking the impossible.

At least, I used to think that. You see, as I was researching and praying over this week's readings, one question kept coming back, time and again - What do you hunger for most?

Now, this question doesn't just come out of thin air.

You see, the Gospel reading for today is a continuation of one long story - a story that has been broken up over the past few Sundays - a story that gets strange and confusing partly just because it *is* broken up over several Sundays.

But it's a story that began with folks gathered around on the eve of Passover - gathered around to hear Jesus preach and to see Jesus heal. In fact, if we look back to the beginning of verse 6, we see that by this point in his ministry, Jesus had quite a reputation for healing. By this point, lots and lots of folks were gathering together to be healed and to see incredible acts of healing.

But verse 6 does not end up being the usual sort of healing story. In fact,

with last week's and this week's reading, I wonder who can remember that this verse began by talking about Jesus being a great healer.

What we find is that verse 6 ends up covering some incredible ground - going in directions the crowds - and we, the readers - never dreamed of - and forcing us all to face for ourselves the question of what we hunger for most.

I think all of us have had some teacher that's meant a lot to us. Now I've been fortunate enough to have had a few, but one of them in particular comes to my mind. He happened to be a practicing Buddhist and as it seems more than a few Buddhists are, he was also a vegetarian.

One day we were talking and I was asking him about being vegetarian. He told me he didn't make too big a deal about it. From Buddhism he learned to revere life. And since he had such high respect for all life, he tried not to eat any animals.

But, he also told me that from time to time his body would tell him that he needed to have some meat. He found out that from time to time, his body would crave red meat. He said he had tried to fight the feeling, but fighting the feeling created more anxiety than just having a burger or small steak every couple months or so - whenever his body told him he really needed some meat protein.

And so it would seem that verse 6 is about hunger. What the people hunger for - what we find ourselves hungering for.

We had the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 - their physical hunger was taken care of and because it was such an awesome miracle, many of the people kept searching for Jesus.

But last week and this week, Jesus turns the tables. He tells the crowd that there is a more important hunger.

The manna in the wilderness fed the people, but those people still died. Jesus promises a food, a bread, that will lead to eternal life.

Jesus opens up the way for us to consider the many different ways, the many different things that we hunger for.

There is, of course, bodily hunger.

But we know there are other things we hunger for, too. There is a hunger for justice. There is a hunger for kindness and compassion.

Some people hunger for stable jobs, or any job.

Some hunger for love and understanding - whether from their spouses or their children or from their community.

Still others hunger for healing - for good health.

All of these hungers affect our spirit. All of these hungers, in one way or another, imprison us, keep us from being free.

Jesus poses the problem simply - there once was bread that came down from heaven - the manna in the wilderness fed the Hebrews as they escaped from Egyptian slavery. That bread fed their bodies so they could find the promised land.

But Jesus tells us there is another bread from heaven - himself. But here is the promise that seems too good to be true - the promise which seems just beyond our understanding - the promise that Jesus is the bread of eternal life.

And that's one good reason why we have the "bread of life" readings spread over so many Sundays. There's something about it just beyond our understanding, but something that draws our hearts to him.

Jesus promises to fulfill all hunger, to quench all thirst.

We know what hunger and thirst are, all of us, in some way or another, know what hunger and thirst are.

But how can Jesus fulfill all hunger and quench all thirst?

I think the answer can only lie in just one thing - that our hunger and thirst become turned toward Jesus.

He tells us he is the bread of life - surely he wants us to only hunger for him.

To be sure, and the Gospels tell us, he fulfills so many other hungers - he has filled bellies, healed wounds, made families whole again.

But for us who have heard the Gospel, for us who have received his baptism, we must turn our hunger toward him.

Then so many of the things that St Paul tells us begin to make sense. So many of the things that St Paul tells us to do, that can seem impossible in our day to day lives, suddenly become possible: Be angry but do not let the sun go down on your anger. Have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And perhaps most astoundingly of all - Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.

You see, anger and evil talk and holding your possessions close to you, bitterness, wrath and wrangling, all come out of a hunger for something or another - usually a hunger to prove you're right, a hunger to protect yourself - whether with food or money or emotions - all of these negative things come from misplaced hunger. All of these negative things will be overcome if we find the true hunger of our hearts turning

toward Jesus.

You see, when Jesus becomes the focus of our hunger, all things will become possible. Surely then we will be imitators of God and beloved children and live in love. Amen.