

Lingering Hunger

John 21:9-14

Lingering in the Shadows of Easter

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Sunday, April 17, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Let us pray: Gathered in your sacred presence, we hunger to know the mystery of the fullness of who you are. We would see Jesus and hear the word that he speaks to us by the power of your Holy Spirit. May we feast upon your presence. Amen.

We continue in our reflections from the post-Easter events in the Gospel of John. Jesus is risen from the dead. We realize that though Jesus is risen from the dead that human life with its vicissitudes and struggles continues. There is an ongoing hunger in the humanity of the gathered disciples to experience the fullness of life. Jesus is there as a resurrected Lord but they continue to hunger for things that are not yet fulfilled and complete. In this pulpit, over the years you have heard many sermons on yearning, on sacred thirst, on the search for home. Deep within our souls is this dramatic hunger to know, beyond ourselves, the greatness of God and that that would include us by grace and love to be invested and fulfilled in God's presence.

Home is very important to us. The disciples in this text are trying to go home to Galilee. But you can't go back. It's just not the same. We can only go forward to home, and so Jesus invites the disciples in the transition to go forward to have breakfast with him on the beach. We hunger for home. It is not a home that we can live in as much as a home we dwell in because God is present with us to create a home among us, within us, and between us. Sometimes I think about the home I grew up in. My father loved to barbecue in the backyard underneath a large walnut tree. In retrospect, I think the fact that there were nuts around reflect a little bit on the circumstances of the barbecue. We nicknamed my father Nebuchadnezzar. For those of you who do not know that name, it relates to an Old Testament story about a king who liked to fry people. In very hot fires. The Bible said that he created fires that were seven times hotter than they had to be, because he wanted to make sure that there was no doubt the person was dead. My Dad liked to cook hamburgers that way. He was very concerned that there might be any red left in the pattie. He would create fires so strong that you could not get within five to ten feet of the barbecue. He had a very long barbecue utensil that could turn the beef. He wanted to make sure that none of those hamburger patties got out of line. I remember that. There is something still within me that likes the taste of charcoaled hamburger meat. But I can't go home. My father is no longer able to cook those hamburgers that way, at least not safely.

We hunger for home. The disciples want to go home, the disciples want to be at home in Galilee. They want to go fishing, and they are hungry for some sense of recalling the life they had together as fishermen on the sea. The disciples also hunger for the shore. After being out fishing all night, they are tired and exhausted; they had caught no fish until Jesus showed up and helped them catch a load of fish. They are exhausted. They just want to get on shore. We hunger for shore. In scripture, the sea is the symbol for change, for volatility, for trouble, for struggle, for adventure. They have been out on the sea all night. They are tired of the adventure of it all.

We hunger for shore. Just a little safe harbor, some sure ground to stand on, some rest because we've worked so hard. We're tired of the struggle. We hunger for shore. We hunger for a sense of mission. The disciples are on the Sea of Galilee. The Galilee term is a Hebrew term. From ancient times the Sea of Galilee belonged to the people of God. But John calls it the Sea of Tiberias because it is no longer home for the people of God; it is now owned by the Romans, and they've changed the name. If you try to go home and the home is owned by somebody else, it's no longer home. The world is no longer home because it's owned by somebody else; the feel of it is as foreign culture, as secular culture, and for the person who has faith, it's difficult to go out there. It's now the Sea of Tiberias; it's no longer the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus has invited them up there to meet him because that is a part of their mission, not their home.

We hunger for mission. I submit to you that the church has a mission right outside of our doors. We all who follow Jesus Christ are missionaries when we walk out this door. It is no longer an environment that is safe and accessible for the church. The church is now a sideline to what's really going on in the culture. We have a mission when we walk out the doors. It is no longer our place. It belongs to somebody else.

We hunger for community. The disciples are together fishing, the seven of them. But there's somebody missing. Jesus is not in the boat. You can almost feel the visceral loss that the disciples have that Jesus is not out there on the boat with them, and all the memories they have gathered with Jesus over those years of ministry together. We are hungry for community where Jesus is in the midst. But we are also hungry for a community, in the meantime, where we can gather in the name of Jesus. We have a sense of deep longing when there is an absence in our midst, and we hunger for their presence. As James Loder of Princeton (Holly, please check that name.) said, "There is a hunger for the presence of the absence." Someone walked out after the first service today and said, "I hunger that I might go to heaven with my husband who is already gone." We hunger for community. And I wonder if they didn't hunger, in some ways, in wishing Judas might have been there with them, and the feeling of loss and pain that he is not.

We hunger to ask questions and have answers. The disciples are wanting to ask Jesus, "Are you really Jesus? Are you really the Lord?" But they dare not ask the question. The text does not say why they dare not, but it is almost as if they are afraid that if they do ask, they might discover that he is not. So they know. But the ongoing questions are still there, and they hunger to ask them. There are gaps in our knowledge and our wisdom and our understanding, gaps in our seeing and our perceiving. We hunger for someone to fill the gaps and to make the difference between what we know and what we do not know.

We hunger for someone to solve our problems and to resolve our conflicts, to bring knowledge and unknownness together. We hunger for abundance. How many times have we said, "There's just not enough." One of the dramatic points of the story is that the

disciples caught 153—count them—153—and it doesn't say "fish," it says "mega fish." Big ones. This is the all-time big fish story of the gospels. There was abundance. When Jesus showed up and did things, there was always abundance. When he fed the 20,000 people, there was abundance. And they hungered for that abundance after being out and not catching anything all night. There's never enough time, not enough money, not enough power, not enough memory, not enough energy, not enough creativity. Lord, please give us an abundance. We hunger for it. Jesus always gives an abundance.

We hunger for perfection. We hunger for things to all be right. We hunger for things to come together in good ways. We hunger for the ducks to be in order. We hunger for the stars to be aligned. We hunger for life to be working in synergy. And most of the time, it just seems as if it is not. A wonderful little phrase in the text was that even though there was a pile of fish, the net did not break. Everything worked at that moment. One got the sense that Jesus knew how to load exactly the right number of fish and weight in that net before it broke. It was all perfect. The disciples knew it.

We hunger for completion and balance. We hunger that all the pieces of the puzzle come together. I remember when I took a vacation with my wife who was on a business trip to Hawaii. I was looking forward to the time after working hard in a church in Dallas, Texas, to be away from all the activity and intensity and, frankly, to be away from the people. (That's no comment on you.) We got to this beautiful hotel, and I knew that my wife was one woman among many men in business, and that I had the unfortunate possibility of being out there by the pool with all the wives. I'm only kidding. I was looking forward to that. I had gotten out there by myself before anybody else had come because we had gotten there early, and it was peaceful. No one was by the pool, it was a wonderful day, and I was just settling down to enjoy the peace and quiet. I had just lain down on the lounge by the pool, and I thought I heard my name. "Gareth!" I said, "That can't be. It can't be God talking to me." And I heard it again: "Gareth, is that you?" And then I had this dismayed sense that even going all the way to Hawaii, someone had found me. It hadn't all worked out the way I wanted it to be. Someone from the church in Dallas, Texas, was also vacationing at that pool at that point in time.

We hunger for things to work out right. We hunger to be invited to special events. Jesus said, "Come to breakfast and eat." We hunger to be invited to meals; we hunger to be invited to homes, we hunger to be invited to church, we hunger to be invited to be with special people whom we know will be of benefit to us. And the disciples had the invitation from Jesus, "Come to breakfast and eat." People are hungry today to be invited. Invite people to things. Invite them to your home, invite them to a concert with you, invite them to join you on a bike trip, invite them to come to church with you. You might be surprised how many people out there are hungry to be invited.

We hunger for a good meal. If there is nothing else that is true about this text, it is that the disciples were hungry. There is probably no better meal than barbecued fish over the charcoal fire. John is very careful, saying "This is a really good barbecue fire." We hunger for really good barbecue. I hunger for good Texas barbecue. There is nothing like that mesquite grilled, finely marinated meat out in the middle of the back part of Texas; for only real Texans can make Texas barbecue. There is something about swordfish on the beach at Laguna Beach in Southern California. There is something about mahi mahi in Hawaii. We hunger for a good meal. And Jesus doesn't betray the disciples. He has a good meal.

We hunger for servant leadership that is willing to prepare the food for us. How many times have I heard, "I'm so tired of preparing meals. I would just love it if someone would come in and prepare it for us." Jesus prepared the meal for the disciples. He had the fish cooking and the bread prepared before they got there. Who went shopping for the bread, and who went fishing for the fish? Jesus did. That's an amazing thing for the resurrected Lord to take time out to prepare a meal. He did this because he was a servant leader. We hunger for servant leaders who prepare things for us in advance, who do things for us when we don't even ask because they understand us to the depth of our being. Jesus prepares the meal in the presence of all of the concerns of the disciples as if leading out of Psalm 23, "The Lord will prepare a meal in the presence of my enemies." Fear, doubt, envy, guilt. Jesus has prepared the meal. We hunger to serve along with Jesus. Jesus does not disinvest himself with the disciples; he invites Peter, "Come on and bring the fish that you caught. We'll cook those too." And Peter immediately goes out and goes on board the boat and lifts that huge amount of fish and drags them onshore, because he wants to be a servant with Jesus.

We hunger to serve and make a contribution. We hunger for the resurrection. We hunger to know that Jesus is raised from the dead. We want to know for sure. We want to have an experience with Jesus in the power of the resurrection. This past week Larry King featured an entire conversation on religious leaders' beliefs about life after death. Because of the death of the Pope and the impact of the masses toward a celebration of resurrection, they had a discussion. It was so sad from my perspective to hear the woman who is an atheist say, "There's no point in talking about life after death. It's an absurdity. It's not reasonable. Let's not talk about it." We hunger for life after death. There is something deep within our hearts, minds and souls that says, "It must be." And Jesus has proven it. Three times he said he would die. And three times he appeared to the disciples to prove once and for all that he was raised from the dead. When the Bible says something three times, the point is: You had better pay careful attention. This is really important. Jesus is risen.

But most of all, all the hungers that we have are really found in completion in the hunger that we have to know God and to be in God's presence. We hunger to see Jesus as the Son of God so that we can see God face to face, and touch God and talk to God. Jesus is the Son of God. Only God can quench the thirst. Only God can bring about servant leadership. Only God can provide enough fulfillment to meet our hungers. We frequently celebrate the Lord's Supper, and the point of the Lord's Supper is this: Jesus is here to feed us to the depths of our being. All hungers are signs and symbols that only God can satiate the soul. Jesus says to us clearly today, "Come and eat. I prepared the meal for you. All you have to do is participate. Come to share life with me." Jesus is the only one who can meet all of our hungers.

Come and eat.