

“Feed Me ‘til I Want No More / Evermore”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
November 4, 2007 - All Saints’ Sunday
and Based on Luke 6:21-26
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

The hymn that we’re going to sing following this sermon has been altered! In our hymnal the first verse goes: “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, / pilgrim through this barren land; / I am weak, but thou art mighty; / hold me with thy powerful hand; / Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, / feed me now and evermore, / feed me now and evermore.” Except that William Williams, the author of the hymn’s words, did not write “feed me now and evermore” in 1745, he wrote, “feed me ‘til I want no more.” And therein lies a sermon, if not a tale.

I don’t know why the editors of our hymnal made the change. No explanation was given. Changing a hymn’s words happens all the time, of course, usually for the sake of making some meaning clearer, or sometimes to get rid of an embarrassing piece of theology. Harvey Gustafson, our organist and choir director while David was on vacation, made one such change last Sunday in the anthem the choir sang. A phrase referred to the “*favored* of the heavenly king,” which Harvey thought was a bit presumptuous and should be replaced with the “*children* of the heavenly king.” We, the choir and I, agreed. Even so with certain hymns: there are good reasons to change the words. But “feed me ‘til I want no more”? What is so awful about that? The change says that we will be fed by Jehovah “now and evermore.” There will never be a time, in other words, when we will not have to be fed by God. The original wording, not to mention promises given in the Old and the New Testaments (Isa. 49:10, Ezek. 34:29 and Rev. 7:16-17) says otherwise: there will come a time when the saints will hunger no more. They will need to be fed until that time. But when that day does come, hunger itself will end. “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; / the sun will not strike them, / nor any scorching heat; / for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, / and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, / and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” Rev. 7:16-17. They will “want no more.”

So which is right? “No more” or “evermore”?

As it turns out (and as you might suspect), each of the two readings has its own biblical justification. The justification for the “no more” version can be found in our gospel lesson for today, in Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain.” You may know this passage better as the “Sermon on the Mount.” It’s the one that begins “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” In the gospel of Matthew Jesus did indeed preach that sermon atop a mountain. But in the gospel of Luke, our gospel for the day, he came down from the mountain and preached his sermon “on a level place,” a plain. The particular verse that bears on our topic of hunger is number 21, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” Your hunger will end. Great is your reward in heaven, for it includes a banquet the likes of which you have never seen. You will indeed

be filled, literally so.

Not surprisingly, the alternative reading—the “feed me now and evermore” reading—is to be found in the gospel of Matthew and it does not refer to a literal hunger. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6) is a metaphorical hunger. It is the absence of righteousness, of justice in the land that drives Matthew’s hunger, and not food per se. And although Jesus promises him that he too will be filled, his hunger never ends—because his expectation that there will be righteousness never ends. It continues into the next world even as he expects it in this world. It is Matthew, after all, who gives us the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in *heaven*” (6:10). So, to give up expecting righteousness would be to give up on the God who by his very nature is righteous. How, then, can Matthew be said to “be filled”? By his participation in the kingdom of God which is, everywhere he turns, righteous to its core. What he longs for he finds. He is fulfilled.

So Luke speaks of a literal hunger that one day will end, and Matthew speaks of a metaphorical hunger that never ends because the righteous never stop wanting righteousness. Where do we fall?

Well, who among us is literally hungry? I’m guessing very few indeed, and especially very few who are hungry because of the poverty brought about by injustice. It wouldn’t surprise me if some there are who skipped breakfast because they were anxious to make it to church on time. And they might be thinking, “I wonder what’s on the menu for coffee hour today?” But that aside, we are not a people who go hungry for lack of food. We are a people who go hungry for lack of.... What do we lack? What are we truly hungry for?

In a recent op/ed piece titled “The Happiness Gap” (*The New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2007), David Brooks wrote, “Some elections are defined by the gap between the rich and the poor. Others are defined by the gap between the left and the right. But this election will be shaped by the gap within individual voters themselves—the gap between their private optimism and their public gloom.” “Eighty-six percent of Americans say they are content with their jobs, according to the General Social Survey,” he wrote. “Seventy-six percent...are satisfied with their family income...[and] sixty-two percent...expect their personal situation to get better over the next five years..., compared with only 7 percent who expect it to get worse.” “[By contrast,] only 25 percent are satisfied with the state of their nation,” “sixty-eight percent...think the country is on the wrong track,” “sixty-two percent think that when government runs something, it is usually inefficient and wasteful, [and] sixty percent think the next generation will be worse off than the current one. Americans today are more pessimistic about government’s ability to solve problems than they were in 1974 at the height of Watergate and the end of the Vietnam War.”

Brooks concluded from all this that voters did not want to be transformed, they wanted to be defended. They wanted a government that would change its life so their own lives could remain the same. They wanted their private, reasonably happy lives left alone, while their public, disquieting fears—of terrorism, rising health care costs, looming public debt, illegal immigration, global warming, and the rise of China—were attended to by a strong but narrowly focused government. “Gimlet-eyed federalism,” he

called it, referring, I think, to the piercing tool, a gimlet, and not the piercing drink by the same name. I think.

What to make of this hunger? Is it biblical, either in Luke's literal or Matthew's metaphorical sense? It is neither. It is not hunger for food, nor is it hunger for righteousness. And for this reason alone, I am suspicious of it. I suspect it is the source of whatever vaguely felt anxiety we may be experiencing right now in our neither secure nor at risk moment in history.

At the beginning of your Order of Worship, I put a little thought piece that speaks to this anxiety from a Jewish perspective. "In earlier times," David Gelernter wrote in the conclusion of his five-part series on "Judaism Beyond Words" published in *Commentary* magazine, "troubled Jews demanded, 'I want to be Jewish but don't know how; tell me.' The Mishnah and the great law codes...were compiled in response to such questions. To-day the body of halakha [of instruction in 'the way of going'] is secure, but troubled Jews have a different question: no longer 'I want to be Jewish but don't know how'; today, 'I want to *want* to be Jewish but don't know how.'"*

I think this is where we are too—not "We want to be righteous, but don't know how," but "We want to *want* to be righteous but don't know how." Or, better, we want to be hungry for righteousness, but caught between our private comforts and our public disease, we hunger for nothing more than not upsetting our apple carts. If this is our condition, then we are not hungry; we are afraid. We are afraid of losing our security; we are afraid of encountering each and every threat, perceived or real.

Since this is All Saints' Sunday, I want to conclude by turning to the saints to see what they have to offer us here. They offer *hunger*, both the literal and the metaphorical kind—indeed, the two fused together in one act, namely, the act of fasting. Fasting is the discipline the saints have used from time immemorial to escape their spiritual paralysis for lives of devotion and service. St. Martin of Tours, for example, began his ministry to the poor by slicing his military cloak in two—he was a Roman soldier at the time—and giving half of it to a poor freezing beggar. The fast that penitents in the Roman Catholic church observe if they want to leave behind their former lives is named after him. It is an artificial hunger that fasting produces, to be sure, but that is what you have to do when you're stuck. You have to begin somewhere. Better an artificial hunger now than a complete paralysis later on. Actually, if we did start now, we would be able to get in on the ancient practice of fasting that Christians everywhere observe in anticipation of the feast of Christmas. Advent, which is coming soon enough, is the time of learning what it means to be hungry—hungry for Christmas goose and hungry for peace on earth. Now is a good time to discover our want. Now is a good time to learn to be hungry evermore.

Thanks be to God, and the saints who have preceded us. Amen.

* Reprinted in *The Best American Spiritual Writing of 2004*, Philip Zaleski, ed. (Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), p. 87.