

Feeding the Hole or Filling the Whole
Isaiah 55:1-9

During my study leave last week, I stayed at a Benedictine Monastery in Mount Angel, Oregon. The Benedictines are a Roman Catholic order of nuns and monks known for their great hospitality, passed to them by their founder, St. Benedict of Nursia.

On our first evening there, my fellow retreatants expressed how overwhelmed they were by that hospitality, evident in the amount and quality of the meal. As dinner wound down, Sister Gertrude – our hostess for the week – stepped into the room to greet and then playfully chastise us: “Nobody is eating my cookies!”

People in our group responded immediately with as much humor:

“It’s Lent! We’d expect a nun, of all people, to understand!”

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Some of you may have chosen to give something up for Lent.

While there are many options for this practice, and while we may tease ourselves about it, most people I have known who restrict themselves from anything for the season have generally kept within these categories:

chocolate (or sweets of any kind, like a few of my colleagues last week);

caffeine – whether in the form of coffee or diet coke;

alcohol;

or meat.

There *are* other choices –

several weeks ago Hal mentioned his practice of learning to stop for yellow lights; and a young woman shared with me her endeavor to suspend an addiction to shopping –

yet for the most part, I’ve met people who attempt to curb some form of feeding.

Why, then, smack in the middle of Lent, does the Lectionary of Biblical readings present us with this text from Isaiah?

“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come buy wine and milk without money and without price”.

Eat, drink, fill up!

Instead of saying “Amen” at the end of our meal blessings last week, our retreat leaders encouraged us to finish each prayer with our hands linked and raised and saying, “Yum!”

That’s one way to respond to Isaiah’s call: “Eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food”.

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What is it that people are letting go of if they make that commitment to these 40 days?

I know that some people endeavor to release something that brings them pleasure, an indulgence... but I see a deeper goal than the practice of self-restraint in these actions.

Much of what we choose to give up often relates to our cravings, our subconscious needs, whether or not we acknowledge them as such.

I believe we all have our ways of covering those needs,

something we’re dependent on to make us feel okay for a little while.

Like an addiction, but our drug of choice doesn’t need to be alcohol or nicotine or caffeine...or it can be.

It can also be overeating or work; excessive exercise, internet use or sex.

Our obsessions can be to the striving for perfection,

for complete authenticity,
 for security,
 or for absolute knowledge.

Our excessive behaviors feed us,
 pretend to provide us with sustenance or satiate us,
 when really they only temporarily hide from us our holes,
 those seemingly unfillable spaces that all humans have but that few of us ever dare to know.

What would happen if we – as during Lent – let go of our “fillers”,
 those addictions that keep us from truly encountering our deep brokenness?
 If we let go of the “fillers” of food, busy-ness, striving-for-the-impossible...
 and actually felt the holes made by our anger, or neediness;
 our sense of failure, despair, or emptiness;
 our delinquency, pain, inherent weakness, or feelings of unworth?

Which hole is yours, deep down; and how do you attempt to feed it?

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

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I am not the first to try to connect the pain of our various addictions or coping mechanisms to human striving for wholeness or the Holy.

“William James [whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* you may have read in an Adult Ed book study last year] suggested in [one of his] lectures that the sway of alcohol is due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties in human beings, and that drunken consciousness is one form of mystical consciousness”.<sup>i</sup>

“Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, said on one occasion,  
 ‘Before AA we were trying to find God in a bottle’”.<sup>ii</sup>

And my ever-faithful *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* adds:

“Clinical evidence suggests that...the abortive attempt to satisfy spiritual needs by nonreligious, chemical means is probably a significant cause of many addictions....

Addiction can be understood as a form of idolatry –

that is, making a false absolute out of a substance that is not ultimate....

Full recovery must include developing healthy ways to satisfy the universal spiritual needs”.<sup>iii</sup>

“Eat what is *good*”, Isaiah pleads, “and delight yourselves in *rich* food”.

Weight loss counselors and psychologists who work with eating disorders have also witnessed some overeaters’ tendencies to attempt to forget or repress painful emotions by feeding them.<sup>iv</sup>

One author I’ve read has even tried to connect an emotion to various food cravings.

Crunchy, high fat foods like fried chicken, chips or fries

she associates with feeling empty due to frustration;

chocolate chip, rocky road or any crunchy chocolate ice cream

she equates with a depression stemming from the holding in of anger;

spicy foods topped with dairy products

such as pizza or Mexican with cheese or sour cream

help feed the sense that life seems dull.<sup>v</sup>

I can't claim how accurate any of these may be for you, but just the idea reveals how diligently we seem to search for the answers, for something that might fill us.

To counteract our inner fears, our holes or brokenness, we feed them with the “stuff” of our lives. And the feeding keeps us from feeling.

When we quit “stuffing” ourselves we let go of the buffer between that sense of inadequacy –  
 that pain or fear –  
 and let it enter fully into our world  
 where we can begin to feed it truly  
 with “That which is good”,  
 with Isaiah’s “rich food” which has “no price”  
 instead of “labor[ing] for that which does not satisfy”.

The true fulfiller is the feast of which the prophet speaks, and later (in John’s gospel) it’s the “living water” that Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, where he says to her,

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,  
 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.  
 The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water  
 gushing up to eternal life”.<sup>vi</sup>

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Lent is a perfect time to get in touch with our physical feedings – however they manifest – and allow Christ to offer us the spiritual feast that releases our lives to the reality of God’s fulfilling wholeness.

So I encourage you – as we continue into the second half of this season’s journey – to check in with yourself, to notice what you may be stuffing yourself with.

And don’t “give it up” for Lent to deprive yourself of *pleasure*;
 rather see if you might get in touch with your deeper *desire*,
 the desire for the nourishment of the Holy,
 for God,
 however you name this great mystery that is life.

So fill yourself with good food; and seek that which will make you whole.
 And may the Lenten journey and its gifts lead you to more than you ever expected.

For the Holy’s thoughts are not our thoughts,
 nor are our ways Whole ways...
 Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are the Whole ways higher than our ways
 and the Holy’s thoughts than our thoughts”.

Amen.

ⁱ “Alcohol Abuse, Addiction, and Therapy” by Howard Clinebell in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, (Abingdon Press, 1990) p. 19.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 19.

^{iv} See author Geneen Roth, literature from Overeaters Anonymous and “Obesity and Weight Control” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*.

^v Doreen Virtue *Losing Your Pounds of Pain: Breaking the Link Between Abuse, Stress, and Overeating* (Hay House, 2002) p. 191-192.

^{vi} John 4:13-14.