

**“Meals that Satisfy”**

**Psalm 63.1–8 and Isaiah 55.1–9**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 14 Mar 04**

The conventional wisdom would say, “Don’t preach a controversial sermon that prods your congregation the week your performance evaluations are due.” Well, I’m going to count on the fact that you’re *not* an ordinary congregation that will get miffed and ding me on my review. And even if you were an ordinary congregation, I’d *still* preach a sermon that pushes you a bit outside your comfort zone. It is a truism that the task of ministry is “to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable,” which pretty well sums up what Jesus did. So, buckle your seat belts!

Food and feeding are powerful metaphors in the biblical tradition, and of course it’s for good reason: we need food to live. (Of course, we also need more than food, as Jesus told the devil.) It’s no accident that one of our two sacraments centers around a meal. I love to cook, so it’s also a metaphor for which I have deep and abiding affection. And, believe it or not, I also love to eat.

Food, of course, has *literal* connotations in the Bible as well. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, it wouldn’t have been a good thing if God had only sent them “spiritual manna:” they needed solid food, as well. But, we also see food as representing God’s abundance for all humankind, as spiritual sustenance, as nourishment for the soul. The Psalmist writes, “my soul thirsts for you,” and “my soul is satisfied, as with a rich feast.” Are there moments in your life when you’ve really felt satisfied in that way: times when everything seems to be falling into place? I’ve had times like that in my life; they usually last for about 30 minutes, but I’ve had the sense that all is well. I’ve never been very good at that “serenity thing.”

But, I sure do know understand the first part, about my soul thirsting for God. I think that most of us have an innate desire for relationship with something bigger than we are, broader than our own time, wiser than our culture, and deeper than our own sense of reality. We thirst for relationship with God. And for most of us, it takes some searching, some probing, some patience. We’re on a pilgrimage that has no endpoint – being on the journey is what counts.

But, there are times, too, of spiritual drought, when we just can’t seem to find God or sense anything resembling the divine presence. I know that I had a really hard time after my mom’s death last year, and when life deals us a difficult hand, we still have to keep playing that hand, even as Job did. But, I find it affirming that the writer of this portion of Isaiah, often called Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah, had the same sense that I sometimes do, that God is hard to find. Writing at the end of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century before Christ, Isaiah identifies spiritual drought, writing that we sometimes live “in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” We all go through this, and we need to find a way to hang in, to be persistent, and to continue on the pilgrimage.



Have you ever been hungry, but you’re not exactly sure for what? You eat a piece of cheese, and that doesn’t do it. So, you munch on some Doritos, and that doesn’t satisfy you. And then you bring in the heavy artillery and devour a brownie, and that still doesn’t work. I saw a bit of a PBS show last week with two cardiologists, and one of them commented that “When we’re under unmanaged stress, all roads lead to the refrigerator.”

It works that way with our souls, as well. There is an empty feeling, something we hunger for, a void that Kierkegaard called a “God-shaped hole” in each of us. And we try to fill the vacuum with things like food, alcohol, drugs, addictive sex, and “retail

therapy.” Do you ever do that? You’re feeling kind of crabby or blue, so you go out and buy yourself a CD or a book or a new sofa or a car? I confess that I can often be found at Barnes & Noble when I’m in a funk. But there are underlying causes that aren’t being addressed when we fill the void with a meal that doesn’t satisfy our deepest hunger.

The sin of sloth was once referred to as “acedia” or “accidie,” and I suspect that while it has a lot to do with biochemical depression or dysthymia, it also has the sense of spiritual torpor or apathy that can overtake us when we aren’t diligent in our spiritual lives and living out our faith. And my surmise is that spiritual fitness and connection is what we thirst for most deeply.

A modern British poet, Martin Robinson has a perfect way to describe acedia in his poem “Two Glimpses from Dante’s Hell:”

“Joy we denied,”  
they mutter in the mud, “out there  
in the sweet air which takes delight in the sun, *secreted smog within*.  
Now, here, under the black, thick tide  
we learn  
all about despair.”<sup>1</sup>

That “secreted smog within” is often what keeps us from reaching out beyond our own narrow confines, beyond the shallow pool of self-interest, to grasp the hand of God and extend a hand to neighbor.

If we are enraptured in the “secreted smog within,” we are unable to identify the things we hunger for most deeply. It’s not another book or CD, it’s relationship with the holy. The spiritual smog is what disguises the hunger for God and makes us misperceive that it’s a hunger for another brownie. And I confess that I fall into this regularly.



Isaiah asks, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” The prophet poses that question for each of us. It’s a way that the Bible can be a devastatingly honest dialogue partner. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

One of the tragic aspects of this is that virtually all of us are spending our money on things that feed neither our spirits nor our bodies. Is a BMW going to fill that empty place in your life? Of course not! But that doesn’t keep BMW from quoting the great German poet Goethe on its website: “No pleasure is temporary for the impression it leaves behind remains.” Even the pleasure of wonderful design and engineering and the impression they leave behind cannot fill the God-shaped void in your soul.

And if we are spending our money for that which is *not* bread – for things that do not satisfy our souls – chances are that we are not using our power to enact justice. I wrote in this month’s issue of the *Placard* about using our power appropriately: economic power, political power, and spiritual power. And I’m going to confront you right now with this question: “How are you using your power to extend the kingdom of God here and now, not by acedia or by avarice but by putting God first?”

Materialism is nothing new in the Congregational tradition. I’m reading a biography of Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th century Puritan theologian and Congregational minister, and he describes the spiritual decline in his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1737: It “appears not so much by a return to the ways of lewdness and

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<sup>1</sup> Poem can be found at [rtnl.org.uk](http://rtnl.org.uk)

sensuality, among young or old, as by an over-carefulness about, and eagerness after the possessions of this life.”<sup>2</sup>



Now, some of you don't like me to talk about money, but I'm going to do it anyway, because it's one of those places where our spiritual rubber hits the road. One inactive member of Plymouth, whom I've never met, told another Plymouth member that they were upset that I was equating money and spirituality. I left a phone message, which they never returned, but I wanted to tell them that Jesus beat me to the punch by about 2,000 years when he said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

This year, 215 families at Plymouth pledged \$335,000: an unprecedented amount for this mission and ministry of this congregation. That's the good news. Giving in mainline Protestant churches, however, has been sliding for over thirty years. In 1968, the average mainline Protestant family gave 3.1% of its gross income for the work of the church. In 1997, that percentage had fallen to 2.6% and now that average is down to 2.5%. That, coupled with a decline in membership in all mainline Protestant denominations doesn't paint a rosy picture of what we're able to do as the United Church of Christ today. We're not in the same position as the Congregationalists who formed the American Missionary Association and built 500 schools and colleges in the South after the Civil War, and it isn't because we're in a less affluent time in our nation's history.

Using the U.S. Census data on household incomes in Ft. Collins, Plymouth families give only about 2% of their incomes to support our mission and ministry. Now, I *don't* think it is the case that we aren't generous people. I do, however, think we haven't done a good job of searching our own souls, examining our economic power, and discerning how we're called to exert our influence as God's partners. And I'd like to invite you to be intentional in thinking about it during Lent this year. With our wealth comes great responsibility.

Here's another way to approach it. If we had 250 of our families invest 5 percent (not the biblical 10% tithe) of their gross incomes for the mission and ministry of this church our annual budget wouldn't be \$350,000, it would be over \$950,000.<sup>3</sup> Think for just a minute what we could do with that additional \$600,000 every year! Each year we could:

- endow a scholarship for two theology students at UCC divinity school in perpetuity.
- fund two new UCC congregations every year.
- provide an entirely new form of housing assistance to people who come to the Homelessness Prevention Program or give 1,200 people \$500 in assistance.
- start a major adult education and spirituality center that would host renowned theologians in residence to help people in Ft. Collins understand that "Conservative" and "Christian" are not synonyms, and that there is room at the table for all of us.
- build a half dozen homes through Habitat for Humanity every year.
- start an English as a Second Language school for the recently arrived members of the Hispanic Community, and provide quality daycare

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<sup>2</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> The average household income in the 80525 and 80526 zip codes is \$77,308. Five percent of that figure is \$3,865.40 x 250 families = \$966,350.

- support fulltime policy advocates in Denver and Washington to work on the root causes of poverty and injustice in this country.
- start a foundation to make grants that would fund new initiatives for progressive theological education
- build a dozen churches in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa each year.
- help fund a peace initiative with Protestant partners in Bogotá, Colombia

How does that grab you? Is that the kind of thing we ought to be doing at Plymouth? Is that how we ought to be working together to use the power that God has given us? *Is that the kind of food that would nourish your spirit and make you feel that your life is accomplishing something of lasting significance? **It's all within our power, but we need to dream big dreams!***

Our actions speak loudly to our children, as well. If they see us providing only for ourselves, indulging in luxuries while half the world lives on less than \$2 a day, they will likely listen to the culture and not to the Christ. They need your example, and so does the world. *Amen.*