

## “The Disciples Were Hungry on the Sabbath Day”

Matthew 12:1-8

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During these weeks of Lent, we have been exploring the truth that God meets us in our hunger and our thirst. We have encountered a number of Bible characters who have hungered for things such as forgiveness and companionship, and a new beginning. As I survey the current landscape and reflect on my own hunger, what I see and feel is that many of us hunger, consciously or unconsciously, for a more satisfying way to express our gratitude. We may send a thank you card but are left wondering if there isn't more we can do to say 'thank you.' We leave a generous tip at the lunch counter, but later we wonder if there wasn't more we could have done to express our gratitude. We look out the window and see the most gorgeous sunrise ever and sing an 'alleluia' or two, but still hunger for a more satisfying way to praise the Creator for the beauty of the earth.

So, in this sermon, I'd like to invite us into that unique wilderness where the hunger is a longing for insight into how to express the gratitude we feel toward God. How does a human being thank God for life, for love, for family, for miracles, for beauty, for friendship? How do we thank God such that our own souls feel satisfied, well-fed. For, in the end, what God hopes for is a grateful heart. A grateful heart is where peace begins. A grateful heart is where joy is found. A grateful heart has no room for violence, no room for bullying, no room for wounding, no room for greed, no room for envy, no room for judging.

To this end, I'd like to raise up three images.

Most of the maize that is grown in Malawi is left on the stalk to ripen and harden. Then, it is harvested and pounded or milled into flour which becomes their staple food for the rest of the year. But right now, this very week, the maize has ripened to what we would call the sweet corn stage. The Malawian villagers consider this a grace, a blessed gift, a delicacy; and allow themselves to feast for one week upon the soft, green maize. It's really a sacred feasting, a Thanksgiving meal. They dare not eat too much of the ripe maize lest there not be enough to mill into flour. It's just that there is so much joy in what God has provided that it's a veritable love feast. Eating the new maize feels like an act of worship, not unlike our Communion meal. And my very favorite expression in Chichewa language captures this joy of God's abundance: chimonga chachiwesi! Sweet, green maize.

To harvest and chomp down on the chimonga chachiwesi is to celebrate life itself. It is one grand expression of gratitude! There is, of course, the physical hunger that is satisfied instantly. But there is a much deeper hunger that is also satisfied; it is the hunger of a human being to express gratitude to God. Later, in July or August, the villagers will carry some of the hardened grain to church as a thank offering, but this week they are thanking God for their lives by nibbling the sweetness of the maize harvest. This is the real reason why I like to take groups of church folks to Malawi, to have a first-hand experience of a people who have almost nothing except for a grateful heart.

The second image comes from the world of tennis. You may have never heard of Clem Easton. When I first met him in 1960, I was 13 and he was an old codger. He walked onto the tennis court with both knees wrapped in ace bandages, both elbows supported in braces, a head band and special shoes to fortify his weakened ankles. Can you picture him?

He would make his way around to all the tennis courts in Forest Park where children would be taking lessons and practicing their strokes. One could count on Clem Easton for a little praise. “Nice backhand! Great volley! Where’d you get that spin on your second serve?” Whether it was your first day with a racquet in your hand or whether you had a New England ranking, you hoped to hear a word of encouragement from this man who seemed to us to be well into his 90’s, maybe 100.

What we were too young to understand at the time was that this was Mr. Easton’s way of expressing his gratitude for all the kindness he had received through his life. For him, it wasn’t enough to write a thank you letter to the editor of the Springfield Republican newspaper. It wasn’t enough to phone all the mentors who had ever helped him along the way to thank them for their wisdom. For him, expressing gratitude to God meant being an instrument of encouragement to the next generations. I can see him now, patting Johnny Mayotte on the shoulder, handing a tournament trophy to Lee Burbank, clapping hands for a winning return of serve from John Hughes, consoling me who had double faulted. Clem Easton has been gone a long time now, but he is in the US Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island, not because he was ever a great player, but because his gratitude for life spilled out into the lives of all the youth who ever set foot on a court in Forest Park. I believe he went to bed each night with his hunger satisfied.

The third image comes from this morning’s text from Matthew’s Gospel. The disciples Jesus chose knew all about the Ten Commandments. They had memorized them in Hebrew school. They knew they were breaking one of them when they walked out into the grain field and harvested food on the Sabbath Day. I can sort of picture them out in the field, looking back over their shoulders to see if anyone were noticing.

I think Jesus understood that the disciples would need more than a knowledge of the Ten Commandments to satisfy their spiritual hungers. They would need grateful hearts.

How does one move from knowing the Commandments to nurturing a grateful heart? Surely, the disciples on that day would not have starved to death if they had toughed it out to breakfast the next morning. If they had just waited, they would not have broken a Commandment; would not have ruffled any feathers. I just sense that Jesus saw this as an opportunity to teach the disciples about the more excellent way, about the way of compassion.

I think Jesus saw that those who follow him must stand out by virtue of having and demonstrating a capacity for compassion. So he leads them out into the field of grain on the Sabbath Day. He gets them all into some serious hot water with the Pharisees. But at the end of the day, they sit together somewhere in a place apart, and they talk about the meaning of the day's events. They see that simply obeying all the Commandments is nice and meaningful and worthwhile. Yet, it is not quite enough. They will need a heart that is bursting with gratitude.

I have come to believe God does meet us in the wilderness. God does meet us in our hunger and our thirst. God does meet us in that unique yearning to know how to be grateful, and how to express our gratitude. Those who stumble upon the secret of a grateful heart are the ones who live the balance of their days in the greatest of hope. Amen.