

“Ndikumvah Njala”

John 6:35-40

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“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” I’ve been carrying these words around with me for some time now.

I was e-mailing with my younger brother, Billy, last week. He is retired from teaching the Religions of India at Temple University. Among other things, he is a Sanskrit scholar. He was sharing with me some of the Sanskrit texts from his PhD thesis. So, I replied, and I know not where this idea came from, I replied with a simple sentence in Chichewa language. I suppose it was to impress him with my superior language skills. I typed, “Ndi kumvah njala.” Translation: I am hungry. He replied immediately, “In any language, those are the three most important words that can be spoken. “I am hungry.” I read his e-mail, and I knew he had spoken a truth. I knew he had touched my soul.

I do hunger. And I’m sure you all do, too. Often, when I enter a restaurant, I am greeted with words such as, ‘how are you today?’ More often than not, I reply, ‘I’m hungry.’ Which is answered, ‘you’re in the right place.’

So, I’ve spent this week pondering these notions of being hungry and of being in the right place.

As I read through the Gospels, I see that Jesus lived at a time when people were hungry. A leper hungered for acceptance. A woman at a well hungered for validation. A child hungered to be heard. A tax collector hungered for reconciliation with his neighbors.

I see that Jesus had a way of meeting people in their hunger and found very creative ways to deliver the daily bread. “I am the bread of life, he says, “whoever comes to me will never be hungry.”

So, there’s an invitation today to ponder our own hunger. What do our hunger pains reveal? This is particularly difficult for men. We have a hard time admitting we are hungry. I suppose it is the same for women. If my brother, Billy, is correct, everyone hungers. At one time or another, we all need to say, “Ndi Kumvah njala.” Naming our hunger is where the feast begins.

I don’t know about you, but I hunger for peace: peace within myself, peace between nations, peace wherever violence persists. St. Francis of Assisi shared this same hunger. In his famous prayer he speaks to God, “Make me an instrument of thy peace.” He not only hungers for peace; he yearns to be involved in peace-making. I share that yearning, to be involved in peace-making. It is unlikely that I will get out to the Standing Rock Reservation this winter to stand up for peace with Jay Taken Alive and Melissa Flying By. It is unlikely I’ll get to Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan. It is unlikely I’ll get to Guantanamo Bay or to the Congo or to the Zomba prison. So, I will have to be a peace maker right here in South Glastonbury. This is the right place for satisfying my hunger.

“I am the bread of life,” says Jesus, “whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” So I went to chat with Jesus about this hunger of mine, to be a peace maker right here where I live. Have you ever done such a thing? I found that he directed me to that well-known scene of enormous tension, that scene where the community has surrounded a certain woman caught in the act of adultery. They are about to stone her to death. It’s what the Law of Moses called for. The people in the crowd grip their stones in their hands; they raise their hands readying to pummel the woman to death.

They look over to Jesus as if looking for some sign, some affirmation, and he very calmly doodles in the dirt with his finger to buy a little time, and then declares, “The one who is without sin cast the first stone.” There is silence; deadly silence. One by one, beginning with the eldest, they drop their stones and go home. He has been an instrument of peace. He has brought to light the futility of revenge; the futility of judging one’s neighbor. I think of peace coming when neighbors let go of the need to judge each other. I want to be an instrument of that kind of peace. I hunger for that kind of peace.

I want to lift up my former piano teacher as a model of this kind of peace making. Joan Dufford was my piano teacher for twelve years. She’d assign me a new piece, maybe by Bach or maybe by Scott Joplin. And she’d insist I practice only two measures at a time; to master those two measures, then to move ahead to two more measures. Often, my 30 minutes of daily practice time evaporated. Often, I’d arrive for my lesson painfully unprepared even for the two measures. I’d sit at her grand piano and play a few notes, and glance over to see the expression on her face. And she would say in the most non-judgmental tone ever spoken by a human being, “Well, it’s coming along. It’s coming along.” We both knew I was under-achieving, but from my teacher there was no judgment. Only encouragement. Departing after the lesson, I’d feel on top of the world; like I had just experienced an amazing grace; like someone met me where I was in my hunger and fed me with a blessing of compassion. “I am the bread of life,” he said, ‘whoever comes to me will never be hungry.’ Mrs. Dufford was a Christ presence for me. She was my teacher in more ways than one.

As we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion today, there is an invitation to come to the table conscious of our own hunger. Bring your hunger to the table. Allow the One who is the Bread of Life to meet you in your hunger, and to satisfy your hunger, perhaps to open a door for you, to show you the more excellent way, the way of peace.

Ndikumvah njala. I am hungry: three of the most important words in any language. It's when we are able to name our hunger that we are living in the greatest of hope. Amen.