

This bread we eat

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August 16, 2015

1 Kings 19:4-8

John 6:35, 41-51

I.

The photo I am passing around this morning is NOT the one I want to talk to you about. That's another picture, of some of the same people, but it is one that I do not possess.

It wasn't the first time I visited them that they showed me THAT photograph. It was the second or third. It was a grainy snapshot, a confused scene of a group of people moving in different directions. "That's my mother," the 19 year-old told me pointing at a small woman carrying a heavy load, apparently at a high speed. "This was the day we had to run from the camp. We had gone to Thailand, but the Burmese soldiers started shooting at our camp even in Thailand. We had to run away. See my mother? She is running." I cannot imagine that day, or the fear that the woman and her two daughters felt. I know it was followed with other days that were more about despair than about fear, with moments when they felt they could walk no further.

There are moments in all our lives when we want to get away because we feel like we cannot go on any more, times when we just felt like we had nothing left in us. So it was, if we recall our reading from the book of Kings, for Elijah, who had been having a rough time of it, even by prophet's standards. On the run for his life, Elijah found himself alone, fleeing from a queen who was more than upset with his behavior. Alone in the wilderness, he crawled under a broom tree—little more than a shrub, most likely—and went to sleep.

When he had nothing left, when it seemed his life was over and he would rather die, Elijah found that God still had not deserted him. There under the broom tree, someone brought him bread and water, and some one—some angel from God—woke him up, to bid him eat and drink. He rose once to eat and drink. Then he went back to sleep. Awoken a second time, he ate and drank again, bread and water. And then he was ready to go on. I don't quote the King James Bible very often, but I love the way the old King James translation puts it. "*And he arose,*

and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the mount of God.”

Meat? Simple fare—just something, something simple, bread. Wine? No, a jug of water to drink. And yet it was good enough to turn things around, good enough to give a taste of hope once more. Good enough to get a person to their feet and get on the road again. When we lie down, never to rise again, it may be as much a desire of the spirit to give up living— as it may be something physical.

Where have you and I tasted this kind of bread? When have we had our thirsts so satisfied? What’s your bread and water under a broom tree?

Sometimes we have nothing else left; we are like marathon runners at mile twenty-one, hitting the wall, no rational resources left. We find ourselves on beyond where the spirit has strength. Yet sometimes in moments like that we find that God is still there—and that we have within our souls a gateway to a different kind of strength, a strength we never imagined. We sense a presence that says “*I am the bread of life*”. And we rise and we go on, in the strength of that kind of soul-force, in the strength that spirit power, although our stomachs be empty and our hearts full of doubt. It is a different strength; this is the bread we need to live, with purpose and passion and renewed power.

II.

People who are at the end of the line often discover extraordinary **internal** resources, not only to survive or subsist, but to start afresh, to take action, to turn things around. The bread we need comes sometimes not from some external angel, but from what is happening in our own hearts, or minds or souls. But sometimes it doesn’t come in the way that those around us are ready for.

Doing neighborhood organizing in Rochester several years ago, I was told that an elderly Italian couple was back, back to the neighborhood group for the first time in years. And the other people there were worried. The couple was angry, angry about something that had just happened on their street, angry the police were not doing much, angry that no one cared. And yet intuitively, I knew something their friends didn’t. The anger was the bread they needed, if they were to resume a journey of caring and working for the good of their street. Anger was the morsel of bread, the drink of water under the broom tree that was helping them to rise. By the end of the meeting anger had been transformed into energy, and one man and one woman were making commitments to take real steps to change their street’s

situation: an energy our whole group had been lacking, a conviction that would not be turned around easily.

“Reason,” said Pope Gregory the Great, “opposes evil the more effectively when anger ministers at her side.” In conversation about this not long ago, a friend who has worked with victims of abuse pointed out that the person who is being abused, let’s say by her husband or partner, often has to get angry before she can find the courage to move out—or to say no in some other way to the abuse. Another person, an older friend who was in Selma, Alabama at the bridge at the beginning of the long march to Montgomery, talked about how ordinary people needed to be angry to find the courage to face the police who were waiting—and to do so nonviolently and lovingly. The old words sung at peace marches remind us of this for we used to sing of love and anger together—“We are a gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.”

Sometimes the bread and water we need to rise up from the place in which we have chosen finally to yield to despair is indeed anger—anger which is part of an appropriate response to injustice. And it is perfectly fine to be angry—as long as it isn’t where we get stuck. As long as it is bread for the journey, not the purpose of the journey. As long as it launches us in a different kind of strength, one that is not toxic but clear, not violent but persistent and powerful in a whole different way!

In August of 1945, seventy years ago this month, the extraordinary poet, Langston Hughes, a Black man who knew anger at injustice well, wrote these words—I want to read just a few verses from a somewhat longer poem. It is entitled:

Give Us Our Peace
Give us a peace equal to the war
Or else our souls will be unsatisfied,
And we will wonder what we have fought for
And why the many died.

Give us a peace accepting every challenge—
The challenge of the poor, the black, of all denied.
The challenge of the vast colonial world
That long has had so little justice by its side.

Give us a peace that dares us to be wise.

*Give us a peace that dares us to be strong.
Give us a peace that dares us still uphold
Throughout the peace our battle against wrong.*

*Give us a peace that is not cheaply used,
A peace that is no clever scheme,
A people's peace for which all [originally men] can enthuse,
A peace that brings reality to our dream....*

III.

You and I live in a world that too often assumes that strength and violence are one and the same, and that coercion is the greatest power at our disposal. And yet if we pause to consider the people we have known, the wars won and lost, the individuals who have made the greatest difference in human history—and the people who have had the most positive shaping impact on our lives—if we stop to consider all these, a different picture of strength and courage emerges.

There is a different strength, a different courage, rooted in hope, nourished in love. It is the kind of strength we have seen exercised not by the faces that preach prosperity and power from our TV screens but by those in every generation who have been willing to take a bite of courage and a sip of the waters of grace, stand up from under their broom trees, and move forward. It is the kind of life fed by the living bread of God, and nourished by the waters of mercy and justice. “I am the bread of life,” says one whose way is a way of deep love, but also honest confrontation. “I am the bread of life,” says the Christ who refused to give up in the face of oppression, suffering, even death.

The path to which Christ calls us, in this congregation, on this street corner, in these times, is one that requires energy and courage and life! We are going to need to listen to the angel voice pressing us to rise and take nourishment. We are going to need to pay attention: look to our hearts and souls, look to one another, even look to angels unexpected to find the spiritual and personal food and drink to walk in the wilderness toward our destination. It is worth the patience, worth the effort! For the place we are moving is not Mount Horeb in the wilderness far away, it is right here. And it is still the Mountain of a just God, a place in which Love at last has the last word, in which every child can come to the table, the table of wonder and mystery, and taste: taste the bread of life, drink deep of the waters of joy and grace.