

John 6: 51-58

SOME YEARS AGO, POLLSTER GEORGE BARNA CONDUCTED A NATIONAL SURVEY ASKING SIMPLY, "WHAT IS THE PHRASE YOU MOST LONG TO HEAR?" THE OVERWHELMING ANSWER WAS RATHER PREDICTABLE: "I LOVE YOU." IN A SOLID SECOND PLACE WAS "I FORGIVE YOU," ALSO NOT SURPRISING. BUT THE THIRD MOST LONGED-FOR PHRASE WAS SURPRISING: "DINNER IS READY!"

"YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT." ANYONE KNOW WHERE THAT SAYING CAME FROM? THE IDEA PROBABLY STARTED IN THE 19TH CENTURY IN FRANCE OR GERMANY. THE ACTUAL PHRASE DIDN'T EMERGE IN ENGLISH UNTIL SOME TIME LATER. AN AD FOR A MEAT MARKET IN 1923 STATED: "90% OF THE DISEASES KNOWN TO MAN ARE CAUSED BY CHEAP FOODSTUFFS. *YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT.*"

I'M NOT SURE WHERE THE MEAT MARKET GOT ITS STATISTICS, BUT THIS APPEARS TO BE THE FIRST TIME THE PHRASE, "YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT" MADE IT INTO PRINT. THE SIMPLE IDEA THAT WE NEED TO EAT WHOLESOME FOOD IN ORDER TO STAY HEALTHY HAD A NEW CATCH PHRASE. IT'S TRUE FOR OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH AS WELL.

HERE WE ARE IN WEEK FOUR OF THIS 6TH CHAPTER OF JOHN'S GOSPEL AS WE CONTINUE TO WADE THROUGH JOHN'S REPETITIONS. I CAN SEE MY 10TH GRADE ENGLISH TEACHER, MR. SCHULTZ, WAVING HIS RED PENCIL AND SHAKING HIS HEAD, SAYING, "REDUNDANT, REDUNDANT, REDUNDANT!"

JUST HOW MUCH MORE DO WE REALLY NEED TO HEAR THIS? HOW MANY MORE TIMES MUST JESUS SAY, "I AM THE TRUE BREAD FROM HEAVEN" AND "FEED ON ME"? APPARENTLY, JOHN THINKS WE NEED TO HEAR IT AGAIN, AND AGAIN. ONLY THIS TIME, THE MESSAGE IS GETTING MORE INTENSE AND MORE GRAPHIC.

OUR REACTION MIGHT BE VERY MUCH LIKE THE LITTLE GIRL WHO SUDDENLY FOUND HERSELF PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE COMMUNION LITURGY ONE SUNDAY. AS THE PASTOR RECITED THE WORDS, "TAKE, EAT, THIS IS MY BODY BROKEN FOR YOU; TAKE AND DRINK, THIS IS MY BLOOD POURED OUT FOR OUR SINS," THE LITTLE GIRL INTERRUPTED THE SOMBER MOMENT WITH A VERY LOUD, "EW, YUCK!"

JESUS EXPLAINS THAT UNLESS WE TAKE HIM INTO OURSELVES URGENTLY, WE ARE DEAD. "UNLESS YOU DO THIS," HE SAYS, "YOU HAVE NO LIFE IN YOU." IT REALLY IS A LIFE OR DEATH MATTER TO CLAIM TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

JOHN'S GOSPEL DOESN'T GIVE US THE LORD'S SUPPER. THERE IS A FINAL MEAL WITH HIS DISCIPLES, BUT IT ISN'T A PASSOVER MEAL, AND JESUS DOES NOT SPEAK THE WORDS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL THAT WE HEAR IN THE OTHER GOSPEL STORIES. HE DOES NOT SAY, "TAKE,

EAT, THIS IS MY BODY BROKEN FOR YOU. TAKE THIS CUP AND DRINK FROM IT, ALL OF YOU, FOR THIS IS MY BLOOD POURED OUT FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF YOUR SINS.” INSTEAD, JOHN GIVES US THESE WORDS ABOUT CHRIST’S FLESH AND BLOOD IN CHAPTER 6, LONG BEFORE THE PASSION STORY. IN JOHN’S GOSPEL, THE WORDS ARE LESS ABOUT REMEMBERING CHRIST’S DEATH, AND MORE ABOUT TAKING HIS *LIFE* INTO OURSELVES.

JESUS SAYS HE IS THE *LIVING_BREAD*. THE KEY WORD IS LIVING, NOT DYING. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE? JESUS AS THE BREAD OF LIFE IS CONNECTED TO THE LIVING JESUS, NOT THE DYING JESUS. IT’S ALL ABOUT LIFE, AND ACCORDING TO JOHN, ETERNAL LIFE MEANS ABUNDANT LIFE.

REV. TIMOTHY SMITH SHARES AN EXPERIENCE HE HAD AS A COLLEGE STUDENT ONE SUMMER ON AN AFRICAN MISSION TRIP. HE WAS ACCOMPANYING A PASTOR OUT INTO VARIOUS VILLAGES WHAT WERE CALLED “THE BUSH,” WHICH MEANT THEY WERE ISOLATED FROM DEVELOPMENT, ELECTRICITY, OR ROADS EASILY PASSABLE BY VEHICLE. IT WAS A RARE AND MUCH-ANTICIPATED TREAT WHEN ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR THE PASTOR CAME AND CELEBRATED WITH THE VILLAGERS THE SACRAMENTS OF BAPTISM AND COMMUNION. SMITH JOINED THE PASTOR ON ONE OF THESE VISITS.

AS THEY TRAVELED TO THE VILLAGE, THE PASTOR SHARED WITH SMITH THAT THEY MIGHT NOT BE COMPLETELY WELCOMED IN THE VILLAGE. THE DESCENDANTS OF VILLAGE MEDICINE MEN FELT THAT CHRISTIANITY HAD USURPED THEIR RIGHTFUL POWER AND CONTROL OVER VILLAGERS. SO THEY WOULD ON OCCASION PUT ON MASKS TO SCARE AND THREATEN THE VILLAGERS.

‘BUSH DEVILS,’ AS THEY WERE KNOWN, MOST COMMONLY APPEARED WHEN THE PEOPLE GATHERED FOR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP. ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION, THE PASTOR SAID, WHILE HE WAS LEADING A COMMUNION SERVICE IN A VILLAGE, THE DREADED BUSH DEVIL DRUMS WOULD BEGIN TO BEAT, AND ALL THE WORSHIPPERS WOULD SCOOP UP THEIR CHILDREN AND FLEE TO THEIR HUTS. SEVERAL CHRISTIANS, INCLUDING A FEW MISSIONARIES, WHO CHOSE TO DEFY THE DRUMBEAT WARNINGS, HAD PERMANENTLY VANISHED. SMITH SAID HE WAS SCARED TO DEATH UPON HEARING THIS STORY.

AS THEY SET UP FOR COMMUNION IN THE MUD AND THATCH CHURCH, SURE ENOUGH, IT HAPPENED....THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. FASTER, LOUDER. ALL OF THE VILLAGERS WHO HAD GATHERED IN THE CHURCH QUICKLY DISAPPEARED TO THEIR HUTS. SMITH WROTE THAT HIS HEART WAS THUMPING ALONG WITH THE DRUMS. WHAT WOULD HE DO IF A BUSH DEVIL OR SEVERAL APPEARED? RUN? HIDE? FIGHT?

SMITH’S CONTEMPLATION WAS INTERRUPTED BY A BELL. NOT A PRETTY BELL, BUT A TINNY CLANGING SOUND, AND THERE WAS THE PASTOR RINGING THE OLD CHURCH BELL CALLING

THE VILLAGERS TO WORSHIP. THE LOUDER AND FASTER THE DRUMS BEAT, THE MORE FURIOUSLY HE PULLED THE ROPE ON THE BELL...A CONTEST, IF SEEMED, CLANG, CLANG. THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. UNTIL ABRUPTLY, THE PASTOR STOPPED AS HIS GAZE DRITED TO AN ANCIENT STOOPED OVER WOMAN SLOWLY SHUFFLING HER CALLOUSED BARE FEET TOWARD THE CHURCH IN DEFIANCE OF THE THREATENING DRUMS. FACES BEGAN TO PEEP FROM HUT WINDOWS IN HORROR AND THEN IN DISBELIEF..AND FINALLY ADMIRATION. THE OLD WOMAN STOPPED AT THE CHURCH DOOR, GLANCED BACK ONCE MORE AT THE JUNGLE FROM WHERE EMANATED THE THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, AND ALMOST WITH A SNEER, STEPPED INTO THE CHURCH. THE PASTOR RESUMED HIS RINGING AND THEN OTHERS FOLLOWED, HESITANTLY AND TIMIDLY AT FIRST, THEN BOLDLY AND DEFIANTLY! WOMEN, THEN LITTLE NAKED CHILDREN, AND FINALLY THE MEN CAME STREAMING TOWARD THE CHURCH, AND THE DRUMS FELL SILENT. NO BUSH DEVIL APPEARTED, AS THEIR GREATEST WEAPONS OF FEAR AND INTIMIDATION HAD FAILED. SMITH WRITES THAT THEY SHARED TOGETHER WITH NO LIGHTS, NO ORGAN, NO STAINED GLASS, THE MOST POWERFUL COMMUNION SERVICE HE HAD EVER EXPERIENCED. THANKS TO THE OLD WOMAN WHO PUT IT ALL ON THE LINE.

IT'S AMAZING WHAT A PERSON WILL DO WHEY SHE'S HUNGRY. IN A PLACE WHERE PHYSICAL BREAD WAS SO SCARCE AND WHERE LIFE HUNG IN THE BALANCE OF MALARIA, CHOLERA, AND TRIBAL VIOLENCE, THAT OLD WOMAN WHOSE DAYS WERE NUMBERED KNEW WHAT SHE NEEDED MORE THAN ANYTHING: JESUS, THE LIVING BREAD OF HEAVEN. SHE TRUSTED ABOVE ALL ELSE THE PROMISE THAT JESUS, THE LIFE-GIVING BREAD WAS HERE, AND SHE NOT ONLY CAME AND RECEIVED IT BUT INSPIRED OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. THIS WOMAN CHOSE THE LIFE AND LOVE JESUS PROMISES IN COMMUNION OVER FEAR.

PERHAPS SOME OF YOU ARE THINKING THIS STORY IS A BIT EXTREME AS WE SIT COMFORTABLY, WELL CLOTHED, BELLIES FULL, COMPLAINING ABOUT THE ECONOMY OR THE DIVISIVE CLIMATE IN OUR COUNTRY. HOWEVER WE ARE NO LESS HUNGRY, ONLY OUR HUNGER IS SO MUCH MORE SUBTLE BECAUSE OF OUR CONSUMERISTIC ATTITUDES THAT WE CARRY EVEN INTO WORSHIP AND BECAUSE OF THE MULTITUDE OF SELF-GRATIFICATIONS AVAILABLE TO US. WE SPEND A LIFETIME TRYING TO FILL THAT VOID IN OUR SOULS THAN ONLY CHRIST CAN FILL WITH LIVING BREAD.

PERHAPS EVEN NOW WAVES OF GRIEF AND FEAR AND BROKENNESS AND GUILT ARE POUNDING LOUDLY IN YOUR HEAD AND HEART THAT YOU FEEL CUT OFF AND REMOVED, DISTANT FROM OR MAYBE EVEN DOUBTFUL OF OUR UNAWARE OF YOUR NEED FOR ANY LIVING BREAD FROM HEAVEN. PERHAPS YOU HAVE TRIED FILLING THAT VOID WITH A VARIETY OF THINGS. IS IT WORKING?

IT'S AMAZING WHAT SOMEONE WILL DO WHEN THEY'RE HUNGRY. GOD LOVES YOU. GOD FORGIVES YOU. JESUS'S PROMISE IS FOR HEALTH IN YOUR INMOST BEING. JESUS WANTS ALL OF YOU, JUST AS HE WANTS TO GIVE YOU ALL OF HIMSELF. IT'S A PROMISE FOR A LIFE FILLED WITH DEEP JOY AND PEACE. AMEN.