

Spiritual Sustenance By Holly Aastuen  
August 9, 2009 John 6:35, 41-51

This week I read a new twist on the often-discussed obesity epidemic. It was an article called the Myth about Exercise and discussed the apparently common practice of people eating more after they exercise. Whether it's because exercise makes us hungry or because we reward ourselves for doing the exercise in the first place, many people eat more (and eat worse) after going to the gym.<sup>1</sup> Though exercise is good at reducing our risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes, the most recent wisdom is that it doesn't do anything for losing weight.

The problem is that our bodies are programmed to get us to compensate for any stress they experience. If our bodies feel like we've overextended them through exercise, our bodies crave energy and calorie replacement.

Those who struggle with the problem of overeating will tell you that exercise isn't the only trigger to overeating. The downfall of many a dieter is emotional eating. People who are emotional eaters eat when they are happy, eat when they're sad, eat when they're angry, eat when they're lonely. Emotional eaters haven't found an emotion that can't be enhanced, soothed or placated with food.

One group that is combating this filling-ourselves-with-things-that-don't-satisfy is a group called Weigh Down, spelled W-E-I-G-H Down and on their website they say: "God did not put chocolate or lasagna or real blue cheese dressing on earth to torture us, but rather for our enjoyment. However, God wants us to learn how to rise above the magnetic pull of the refrigerator so that food does not consume our lives."

They go on to say, "We have been created with two empty, needing-to-be-fed holes in our bodies. One is the stomach and the other is the heart.

"Trying to feed a hurting, needy heart with food or anything on this earth (alcohol, tobacco, antidepressants...money, the praise of other people, etc.) is a common error. The person who attempts to feed the longing heart with food will stay on the path to overweight."

We have this longing to be filled and when we find something that seems to work, we sometimes use it to excess.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

And the people said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" As if to say, 'How can he be the bread of life come down from heaven? Wasn't he the kid I had to run home when it was supper time? Do you remember that time he got lost in Jerusalem? How can he be the bread of life come down from heaven when he couldn't even find his way home?'

Spiritual Sustenance By Holly Aastuen  
August 9, 2009 John 6:35, 41-51

The crowd who heard him talk in such a way had little imagination about how he could be anything beyond what they could see with their eyes. They became angry at what they perceived to be arrogance, and were in all likelihood unable to hear the words of life, of eternal life, that he shared with them. They couldn't hear that he was offering them something that would satisfy the hunger of their souls.

The way we view the world can limit or expand our horizons, can limit or expand our understandings. If the people had seen more than the carpenter's son, they might have heard the depth of the good news, but because their vision was limited to this world and to what they had known and experienced, they missed the vastness of God's grace.

There's an old story of a farmer and his mule. In order to save money, the farmer tried mixing in sawdust with the oats he fed his mule. First he mixed in the sawdust to be about one fourth of what he fed the mule. Then he tried half. That seemed to work, so the next time he fed the mule, three-quarters of what gave it was sawdust. Then he changed the mix to one hundred percent sawdust. Two days later the mule died. The farmer commented, "That mule ate himself to death."

We must pay attention to what is filling our lives, because even if it seems insignificant at first, what we fill our lives with will be what we are. Are we filling our lives with things that bring life? Or are we filling them with something else?

Here's where the pastor is supposed to say, "Fill your lives with prayer and Bible study and meditation and your lives will be filled with good things and these good things will bring you life." But I can't. As much as I'd like to say that if you just fill your lives and your minds with eternal things that everything will be all right, there are no guarantees.

I've had enough experiences of feeling empty even when practicing good Christian habits; I've had enough experiences of trying to fill my life with good things and even when I'm doing soul-filling things, sometimes I still feel empty.

Sometimes I think that I just need to get over it, to try harder, or embrace more fully the Christian practices that are supposed to fulfill me. But even when I do that, I sometimes still feel like I'm in the middle of a dry spell. Sometimes I think the best cure for my emptiness is a vacation. But that doesn't always do it either.

More than likely, what I'm experiencing is the natural ebb and flow of life. Sometimes we can point to something that's causing the emptiness, that's causing the ache, and sometimes we can't. Sometimes we know what's wrong, most of the time we don't.

And even though prayer and study and meditation don't act like a magic pill that makes everything well again, faith combined with those things do seem to wrap

Spiritual Sustenance By Holly Aastuen  
August 9, 2009 John 6:35, 41-51

you in comfort as you go through it. It helps me, perhaps it helps you, to see the long view, to know that even in biblical times people were seeking after things that did not satisfy, to see that I'm not the first or the only one to feel distant from God. And it was to them and it is to us that Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Jesus wants us to keep eating the bread of life throughout our lives—the bread that never makes overweight, that always makes us fit for life.

What do our lives look like when they're sustained by the bread of life? They look like lives that aren't seeking for fulfillment in inappropriate places. Lives sustained by the bread of life, seek Christ first and all other things will follow. Lives sustained by the bread of life, are content with the way God made them, but discontent with the way the world is until all have had a taste of the bread of life.

Unfortunately, many times in our churches we aren't so much nourished by our life in Christ as we are wearied by preparations. Sometimes we focus so much on the tasks of the church that we miss the joy.

We need to be reminded of the joy.

At the foot of a great mountain in China lived a father and his three sons. They were a simple and loving family. The father noticed that travelers came from afar eager to climb the dangerous mountain. But not one of them ever returned. The three sons heard stories about the mountain, how it was made all of gold and silver at the top. Despite their father's warnings, they could not resist venturing up the mountain.

Along the way, under a tree, sat a beggar, but the sons did not speak to him or give him anything. They ignored him. One by one, the sons disappeared up the mountain, the first to a house of rich food, the second to a house of fine wine, the third to a house of gambling. Each became a slave to his desire and forgot his home. Meanwhile, their father became heartsick. He missed them terribly. "Danger aside," he said, "I must find my sons."

Once he scaled the mountain, the father found that indeed the rocks were gold, the streams silver. But he hardly noticed. He only wanted to reach his sons, to help them remember the life of love they once knew. On the way down, having failed to find them, the father noticed the beggar under the tree and asked for his advice.

"The mountain will give your sons back," said the beggar, "only if you bring something from home to cause them to remember the love of their family."

The father raced home, brought back a bowl full of rice, and gave the beggar some as a thank-you for his wisdom. He then found his sons, one at a time, and carefully placed a grain of rice on the tongue of each of them. At that moment, the sons recognized their foolhardiness. Their real life was now apparent to

Spiritual Sustenance By Holly Aastuen  
August 9, 2009 John 6:35, 41-51

them. They returned home with their father, and as one loving family lived happily ever after.<sup>2</sup>

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said, or as the Asian translations of the Bible say, “I am the rice of life.”

We gather here this morning to remember what home tastes like, to get a taste of the eternal bread that reminds us of home.

Just as any ordinary life is filled with highs and lows, with bumps and bruises, so our lives with Christ have their ebb and flow. The challenge is to take a taste of that rice, to take a taste of that bread, to experience the love of Christ and remember who we are. The bread of life is a gift. It is the food of God’s kingdom, reminding us that this kingdom is our true home.

---

<sup>1</sup> Time Magazine, August 17, 2009 P. 42

<sup>2</sup> Story originally told by Linda Fang at the Smithsonian Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C., March 19, 1988.