

“The Crave is a Powerful Thing”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 11, Proper 13, Lectionary

Texts: Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15, John 6:24–35

Preached: August 5, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God whose love sends us daily bread, and from Christ Jesus, who is the Bread of Heaven. AMEN

Isn't it funny how simply thinking about food—most days—can trigger that sense of craving? Stop for a moment and think about your favorite food. What is the food that can create that sense of craving for you? Picture it in your mind's eye. Smell the fragrance. Savor the taste on your tongue as your mouth begins to water. We all have different cravings. For Tom, it's White Castle hamburgers. Personally, I find the smell of them a bit off-putting, and whoever came up with the idea of steaming hamburger meat is not in my culinary Hall of Fame. And don't get me started on their phony onion rings. But for Tom, the smell of White Castle sliders triggers memories of stopping to grab a bag of “Whitey one-bites” after a night of police patrol or of partying. All you have to do is mention White Castle, and he wants to head out to get some. He craves them.

And apparently he's not alone in that. There seem to be lots and lots of people who get the same craving at all hours. There are folks who have frozen ones shipped to them in places where they are not otherwise available. And there always seems to be this deep-seated association with fond memory. So White Castle came out with an advertising theme centered on that sense of craving. Their slogan is “The crave is a powerful thing.” They've created a whole website focused on people's craving for their product, where customers are referred to as “Cravers,” and where they can vie with one another in telling their stories of their cravings for White Castle hamburgers in order to be enshrined in the “Cravers Hall of Fame.” The crave is a powerful thing.

That's a simple example of how craving is hardwired into us, I think. We immediately recognize it, don't we? Because deep in each of us is a craving. Thinking beyond food, what are the things you crave? Success? Security? Companionship? Peace? Wellness? Release from guilt or shame? Sobriety? Certainty? Knowledge? Acceptance? Truth? Love? There are lots and lots of things we can crave. Some are common to most of us, while others reflect the unique circumstances that have made you you. Some cravings are good and wholesome and healthy, while others are detrimental and destructive and corrosive. But deep down, we are created with hearts that crave. And the crave is a powerful thing.

In today's scriptures, the craving for food takes central place. In the Exodus passage, God has just led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. They find themselves out in the desert, with no provisions other than what they grabbed on their way out. Hunger sets in. Craving sets in. They begin to crave the food they had in abundant supply in Egypt. And when there is no obvious means of satisfying the cravings, the people become angry and disgruntled and discouraged. They begin to grumble against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. They go so far as to say they wish that God had just killed them in Egypt, rather than to bring them out into the wilderness where all they can do is crave what they do not have.

And so God arranges to satisfy their cravings. God promises to send flocks of quail so they can have meat, and promises that they will have their fill of bread each day. But instead of the flat loaves cooked on a brick hearth that they expected, God provides this mysterious sweet substance called manna that rains down on the ground at dawn each day, and is to be gathered up and eaten. It's interesting, the word “manna” is thought to mean one of two things: either “daily portion of food” (think “daily bread”), or it may have come from an Egyptian word that essentially means “what the heck is this?”. Sometimes we don't recognize what God is providing for us to satisfy our cravings, do we? And so for the next 40 years, the story recounts that God rained down manna to sustain God's people in their wanderings. That didn't mean that they were satisfied, though. Later, the story tells us, they began to despise what God was giving them, and began to long for the fish they used to eat for free in Egypt. They began to crave the cucumbers and melons, the leeks and the onions and the garlic...and they begin to grumble again, begin to long even for their prior slavery. What do you crave that isn't good for you, yet in memory it still pulls at you? The crave is a powerful thing.

Then in the gospel lesson, we hear the echoes of God's providing of manna. Last week, we heard the story of the feeding of the multitude, with its deliberate reminders of God providing manna in the desert—baskets for gathering up the bread provided so mysteriously, the people scattered on the grass as though they themselves are manna. And God opens God's hand and feeds them miraculously. Their hunger is satisfied...for a moment. The disciples steal away in the night in a boat to Capernaum, and Jesus follows, walking on the

water. And the people wake up the next morning, their hunger returned, their craving returned, and some of them decide to set out in boats themselves, tracking Jesus and the disciples down, hoping that he will feed them once again. But Jesus pushes back some, and does something very interesting: He tells them that at heart, their craving for bread is just the surface level. They really are craving something deeper, something more important, without even realizing it. And that craving can only be satisfied by an encounter with the living God.

There are lots of physical things we crave, those things we need for daily sustenance. But deep down, there is a craving that cannot be satisfied purely by physical things. Some of you may be familiar with Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." Maslow argued that there is a sort of five-level pyramid of needs shared by all people. The first four are what he calls "deficiency needs," the things we are lacking and crave: physiological needs, safety needs, the need for social belonging and love, and the need for esteem and respect. He argues that we must have those things in order to achieve the fifth, and highest, need, which is the need for what he calls "self-actualization"—becoming a whole person who can live up to the full potential of being human. And I think this final need is the need that Jesus is pointing to, this longing, this craving, to be whole and complete.

As the church, I think that our calling is to journey together toward wholeness, not only for ourselves, but for others. What are we doing to meet people's physiological needs? I look at Café Immanuel and the Farmers' Market, and the outreach we do through grants to hunger organizations, the assistance we give to organizations housing the homeless, and assisting young people with housing through Bridges to Home, and providing school supplies to neighbor children, and I'm thrilled at the ways in which we help meet those physical cravings. And what are we doing to help people feel safer? We offer a place of welcome, we have joined in public statements of solidarity with those affected by immigration policies and other government policies that place them at risk. What are we doing to meet the needs for social belonging and love, for esteem and respect? I think those are the questions we need to ask ourselves frequently.

But we are not called to be simply a social service agency or social club. Frankly, there are secular agencies that can do far more to provide for physiological needs than we can. So what can we offer that is unique? What makes the church different, when we are doing the work of God? We can offer relationship and community for those who do not feel they belong, knowing God has made us one in Christ Jesus, and has knit us together as a body, a beloved community. We can offer love and acceptance, because we have known love from God and from one another. We can offer respect for all people, rooted and grounded in the recognition of the image of God that we affirm is indelibly sealed on each human soul. And together, as we meet these needs, these cravings, we are shaped by our encounter with Christ Jesus, the Living Bread who feeds us.

Sarah Miles, in her book *Take This Bread*, describes her first encounter with the Living Bread, when she walked into St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, her first experience ever with Christian worship: "I walked in, took a chair and tried not to catch anyone's eye. There were windows looking out on a hillside covered in geraniums, and I could hear birds squabbling outside. Then a man and a woman in long tie-dyed robes stood and began chanting in harmony. There was no organ, no choir, no pulpit: just the unadorned voices of the people, and long silences framed by the ringing of deep Tibetan bowls. I sang too. It crossed my mind that this was ridiculous. We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. 'Jesus invites everyone to his table,' the woman announced, and we started moving up in a stately dance to the table in the rotunda. It had some dishes on it, and a pottery goblet. And then we gathered around that table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, 'the body of Christ,' and handing me the goblet of sweet wine saying 'the blood of Christ,' and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me. I still can't explain my first communion. It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb, or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening—I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening—the piece of bread was the 'body' of 'Christ,' a patently untrue, or at best metaphorical statement; and what I *knew* was happening—God, named 'Christ' or 'Jesus,' was real, and in my mouth—utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry."

That experience transformed Sarah, and gave her a passion for feeding people physically and spiritually. My prayer as we come to this table today is that in eating this bread, not only will your craving for food be satisfied, but also that in eating, Jesus will happen to you, satisfying your deepest craving, and that the encounter with the Bread of Heaven will transform you for the good of the world. Bring to this table all your deepest cravings. The crave is a powerful thing. AMEN