

Did you ever hear the story about a man who bought a parrot to fill his lonely hours? The day after he got the parrot he went back to the pet store to complain, “This bird doesn’t talk.” The store owner asked if he had a mirror in his cage, and the man said he didn’t. “Parrots love mirrors,” the clerk explained. “If he sees his image in the mirror, he’ll start talking right away.”

The bird owner was back the next day, griping that his parrot still had not spoken a word. “That’s peculiar”, said the pet expert. “How about a swing? Birds really love these little swings, and a happy parrot is a talkative parrot.” But he was back the following day with the same lament. “Does he have a ladder to climb?”, the salesman asked. “Once he has a ladder, he’ll probably talk your ear off.”

On the next day, the man was waiting at the pet store when it opened. “Didn’t your parrot like the ladder?” the clerk asked. His repeat customer looked up and said, “The parrot died. He did however finally speak.” “What did he say?” the shopkeeper asked. Well,” said the customer, “in a weak little voice, he asked me, ‘Don’t they sell any bird seed at that pet store?’”

Frederick Buechner writes, “We don’t live by bread alone, but we also don’t live long without it. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence—both on food and each other. It also reminds us of other kinds of emptiness that not even the blue plate special can touch.”

For the fifth week in a row our Gospel reading is drawn from the 6th chapter of John in which Jesus addresses the hunger within us all, announcing “I am the Bread of Life”, and promising, “whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” Much is made in the Bible of bread. When they had no food and were at the point of death, the Israelites were saved in the desert by God’s gift of “manna”. Jesus taught his disciples, and us, to pray for “our daily bread”, but when tempted by Satan to replicate the manna miracle by turning stones into bread, he replied, “Man cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

I believe that we are living in a time in which there is an intense craving for spiritual nourishment. With rapid social changes it is easy for us to lose our sense of identity and connection. So there is great hunger to be fed with meaning and hope. The problem so often with a disconnected spirit is that we feed the wrong animal. C. S. Lewis wrote, “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” As human beings we find our true hope by tending to our spiritual need for nourishment. When our spirit is fed, we can keep our life in balance.

There is nothing wrong with taking care of oneself physically and looking our best. There’s nothing wrong with being ambitious and working hard to get ahead in one’s career. There’s nothing wrong with acquiring possessions and owning nice things. The problem is when we line our lives, like a cage, with these things, expecting them to satisfy our deepest longings.

For what do you hunger? Is it to belong to a community in which you matter? To find work that feeds your soul? To be reconciled to a loved one? To believe there is hope in life when we are inundated by news of violence that tempts us to cynicism?

To what do you turn to satisfy your spiritual yearnings? For some it may be food, for others alcohol. Or maybe the longing for recognition, the longing for fame or fortune drives your hunger. Arthur Simon, the founder of Bread for the World, sums up the dilemma of our times, saying, “The problem is not that we’ve tried faith and found it wanting, but that we’ve tried mammon and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient....” Simon then observes, “We are human beings, not human havings. God loves us for who we are, not what we have.”

The 6th chapter of John begins with the story of the feeding of the 5,000, a feeding miracle that was so powerful that it caused those fed to believe that Jesus might be the long awaited prophet who would deliver Israel from oppression once and for all. However, this chapter is not primarily about miracles, but ultimate loyalty. When Jesus refers to himself as “the Bread of Life” and calls on his followers “to eat of his flesh” to find life eternal, we hear

of God's loyalty, God's passion, for us. Here, as in so many other places, I think what Jesus is trying to tell us is what an extremely intimate relationship God wants to have with us. We use the words "flesh and blood" today to describe our most intimate relationships, our family ties, our biological connections. When Jesus uses these words, inviting us to eat his flesh, he's saying that he wants to be flesh and blood to us.

But I think the 6th chapter of John is also a test of loyalty for us as it was for Jesus' questioners. It is a test to see if we will trust that God's agenda, made known in Jesus the Christ, controls the future. Will we follow Jesus in giving ourselves for the life of the world or will we be content to address our spiritual hungers with material things that will always be less than filling? God so loves the world that God poured out God's very life, very self, for our sake—not because we are so worthy, but because we are hungry and thirsty for the wholeness, love, and eternal life that only God can give us.

So as we break bread today, we are invited to reflect on what really matters in life: reconnecting with our spirit, with our dreams and hopes; the people to whom we need to reconnect, as well as the earth which sustains us; and reaching out to the broken and lost among us who long to find a community of hope to which they can become connected. Let us be mindful in this communion of the appetites of our hearts, the false hungers and the deep longing for spiritual nourishment. Let us also be mindful of those in need of food to eat and see them not as a threat, but as God's invitation to grow closer to them and God by being generous. Finally, let us remember the words of Robert Farrar Capon, ""We were given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it great."