

SERMON: Hungry

TEXT: Luke 4:1-13

My sister Emily announced on Facebook last week that she is going off sugar for a month. She was making it public for accountability and support, saying “Please send prayers, and alcohol.” Well, I didn’t think it was the right time to share my suspicion that most alcohol has sugar. But I did comment on her post with just one word: masochist.

I don’t believe this is a Lenten discipline for her; apparently she didn’t think she could do it for six weeks. She didn’t give any reason for doing it, although the addiction to sugar among the women in my family goes back generations. We *always* had dessert after meals when I was growing up, and snacks could rarely be called healthy. My mom would intentionally leave some milk in her glass after a meal so that she could rationalize the need for dessert: “I have to have something with my milk,” she’d say. She also kept a stash of candy bars in a dresser drawer in her bedroom.

For myself, I will be forever indebted to Hogwart’s Professor Lupin for encouraging Harry Potter, “Have some chocolate, you’ll feel better.” My hero! I used to try to give up chocolate or all sweets for Lent, but I don’t do that anymore

because I always cheated and failed, obviously. I also realized that my focus was much more on the chocolate and less on Lent.

Unfortunately, I think that's often what happens to many of us in our Lenten disciplines. They are more like New Year's Resolutions. We're trying to improve ourselves, become better and healthier people. These are certainly admirable goals to have. But I wonder how much of it brings us closer to God. Do our disciplines make us better Christians? Are we strengthening our faith or just our willpower?

For those of us who are addicted to sugar – of just food in general – have you ever snacked your way through the house trying to find something satisfying? You don't really want to leave the house, so you start searching the refrigerator, the freezer, and the pantry, for something good to eat. You find something, eat it, and then realize that's not what you wanted. Your therapist might suggest that you're not really hungry at all. You're eating your emotions, instead of feeling your emotions. You're eating out of boredom, or anxiety, or depression, or grief.

After forty days in the wilderness with no food whatsoever, Jesus was truly hungry. Physically hungry. Famished. Literally starving. More vulnerable every day to the temptations of the devil. Or so we would assume.

But then the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Many of us would succumb to such a temptation with skilled rationalization. “What could be the harm? I wouldn’t be hurting anyone else; I’d actually be helping myself. So, I have a little bread. That doesn’t mean I’ve lost my faith in God. It doesn’t have anything to do with faith. Father will understand. I’m not giving in to the devil; I just need something to eat.”

As Luke continues the story, he leads us to believe that Jesus did not even hesitate before refusing the devil’s offer. Quoting scripture, Jesus replies, “It is written, *One does not live by bread alone.*”

How do you suppose Jesus was able to show such strength at a time of unimaginable hunger? Well, that one’s easy. Jesus is the Son of God. He is one with God and the Holy Spirit. He is fully divine. Of course, he can withstand temptation! But we mustn’t forget that he was also fully human – vulnerable to all our human frailties, physical and emotional.

Let’s go back to the beginning of the story. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”

Physically, he was hungry. But Jesus was also *full of the Holy Spirit*. He had just returned from the Jordan River, where he was baptized and heard from heaven God's voice of affirmation: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Affirmed, beloved, and full of the Holy Spirit. In these realities there is great sustenance. Do you know that an infant who is regularly fed but rarely touched or held or spoken to, may fail to thrive? Indeed, *one does not live by bread alone*.

The devil continues to confront Jesus with temptation, leading him up the mountain and showing him all the kingdoms of the world, saying, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then will worship me, it will all be yours." Again, Jesus answered with the words of scripture: "It is written, *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*"

The final challenge put before Jesus was when the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, *He will command*

*his angels concerning you, to protect you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is said, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

Notice that each time, Jesus answers evil and temptation with scripture. The familiar words of his faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit give him strength and sustenance enough to fill the emptiness of his hunger.

Historically, the Presbyterian Church is known for strong Christian Education programs. The emphasis, though, has been more on learning the themes and ideas in scripture rather than on memorization of Bible verses. In seminary and throughout my ministry I have felt lacking in knowledge of Bible, especially when I engage in study or discussion with someone from a Baptist tradition. The words of scripture and the teachings of Jesus can provide a strong foundation and keep us steady when the world is crashing down around us.

One pastor wrote about her friend “who has been in the wilderness for a long time. She is grieving the death of her father. She is caring for a mother whose dementia is so advanced she no longer knows who she is. Her teenage child has been acting like, well, a teenager. She told me there were days she didn’t think

she'd make it, and she said that on those days [she] would walk for miles and miles, and as [she] walked she prayed." She said, *I recited all the prayers of my childhood, prayers I didn't realize I still knew.... I would pray the Lord's Prayer over and over again.... I would pray, O God, come to our aid and hasten to help us. She said, I think those words enabled me to keep going. They may have saved my life.*" (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, March 5, 2019)

I think we often go through life like we're scrounging around for food when food is not what we really need. I think we are HUNGRY. We are hungry for something that will fill a God-shaped hole in our hearts. We are hungry for someone to claim us and call us *Beloved*. We are hungry for the kind of affirmation that is unconditional and everlasting. We are hungry to know that there is a power and a presence we can trust. Someone who promises to never leave us or forsake us, someone who vows that there is nothing in the world that can separate us from an ever-present, everlasting, and eternal love.

One does not live by bread alone. As we gather at the Lord's Table, we will feed on the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of Salvation. By the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened and filled, nurtured and sustained by a mere bite of bread and a sip of juice. Here at this table, we can find welcome, belonging, and love

everlasting. Here at this table, may you find all your hungers filled... to the glory of God!

AMEN.