

# Kate Cudlipp: Hungers

## Hungers

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by Kate Cudlipp

This morning I want to talk about a variety of hungers. Throughout his ministry, Jesus recognized both our physical and spiritual needs to be fed. When he said, in the gospel passage for this morning, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry; whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty," he was not telling us that we had no more need of physical food.

Jesus recognized that one of the best ways to speak to people about their deepest longings was to talk about food and drink, about being fed. We are incarnated creatures; Jesus was incarnated—flesh and blood. It is in our very nature to eat and drink; it is also in our very nature to long for – to hunger for – the fruits of the Spirit. Our spiritual and physical hungers, I believe, emerge from a common Source, but are not satisfied by a common food.

What is the nature of the bread and wine that Jesus calls us to? It comes to us when we are, in the words of Joseph Campbell, following our bliss, or in Gordon's phrase, when we are seized by the power of a great affection. When we are on our path, answering our call, we are being fed by Christ in a way that satisfies our deepest hungers.

It might seem it should be natural, almost easy, to do what gives us greatest fulfillment. But we humans get easily confused about our hungers. Somewhere deep inside we know that to recognize these calls on our lives means giving up much as well as gaining much. Jesus spoke of the folly of gaining the

whole world at the cost of giving up our true selves. We fear the opposite: having to give up the whole world in order to claim our true selves. So we avoid feeling the real hungers and instead feed our physical selves.

The media recently publicized results of a study on the weight of Americans, and, I believe, concluded that 30% of adults in this country are overweight. There are lots of problems with various definitions of "overweight" that I won't get into here, but I believe we can see from this report that many people are eating beyond the point that our bodies need nourishment.

I can attest to my own experience, sometimes several times a day, of going into the kitchen and taking one of those hard pretzels out of a bag and munching on it – to satisfy a hunger that is not physically based. It is a diversion from sitting with an emptiness that is uncomfortable, that is waiting to be filled from another source. That same sense of a void can impel me to buy a compact disc I have heard or a book that I believe will bring me wisdom or a piece of clothing "to bring something new into my life."

I eat or buy things rather than experience my fear of not being able to have what I most hunger for: real connections with others and with God. My fear is that if I let anyone or thing matter too much, I will lose them or be rejected by them. If people know me well enough, they will not accept me. So I have kept myself insulated, trying to be sure that nothing matters too much.

I had a glimpse of what could be in store for me three weeks ago when I was with my dad in Richmond. On the way to a restaurant on Wednesday evening, we saw a great plume of black smoke rising from the central part of the city. The next morning the headline in the paper was, "St. James's Church Destroyed by Fire". That was the church in which I was raised. My father told my brother and me about the report in the paper

in the most dispassionate terms, like it was not related to him, although he has been a member of the congregation since 1928; his father was organist there; my brother and I were baptized and confirmed there. He wasn't letting anything matter too much.

I knew that I didn't want to be that disengaged, that untouchable. I rejoiced in the sad but hopeful fact that I felt a deep pang of loss, and I felt in my insides a hunger for deep connection; for being known, not protected; for a generous heart that lets me hold my gifts and possessions with open hands.

I believe that hunger is planted in me – and every human – by God and can only be satisfied by stripping away pretense, self-defenses, and reliance on false gods to feed us. Our essence is to open ourselves to the needs and gifts of others.

What type of community allows us individually and collectively to respond to these deepest longings?

We have two quite contrasting pictures of communities in the Old and New Testament lessons for this morning. Does the Old Testament picture of community seem to answer our deepest longings?

We have been sampling the reign of David for several weeks now, which, as Cynthia Dahlin described it two weeks ago, is a soap-opera-like novella. David is the central character; it is he we are most likely to look at and ask, "What is God saying through the life and faith of this king?" There is much to be learned from David, but I have found myself more and more impatient, as week after week, we have revisited the David story. When I stopped to ponder why this was so, I realized that I am tired of one person's being on center stage. The rest of the people in the story are clearly secondary, supporting actors. The principal actions are David's to take; the reactions come from his subjects.

In this novella we see people devoting their energy to attempting to influence the king; their power is derivative and only has value insofar as the king is affected by or responds to their actions. This is one of the grave faults of hierarchies: there is little room for the free and authentic exercise of people's gifts.

Look at the story of the woman from Tekoa. In the passages just before the one in the lectionary, we see Joab, David's chief lieutenant, scheming to avoid the civil strife that might occur because Absalom, a popular figure with the Israelites, is in exile. Rather than go to David and have a heart-to-heart talk, Joab seeks out a wise woman – is she considered wise because she has the capacity to fool the king? – and coaches her in a role-play crafted to change the king's mind. She expends energy in rehearsing her part and going to the king to perform. She is successful because David recalls Absalom from exile. I wonder if this performance fed her deepest sense of herself or if she went home hungry for the next role that would prove, for a moment, how "wise" she was.

Another grave fault with hierarchies, in addition to limiting the free and authentic exercise of gifts, is that once a leader is in place, many of us give over our power to that person. We do so out of fear or inertia: fear of the leader's disapproval if we act or think independently or inertia that assumes all problems will be solved by the leader. The very structure of a hierarchical society diminishes the sense of responsibility each person feels for the well-being of the whole. It is not even necessary for the leader to be evil or misguided for the situation to go awry. Once substantial numbers of people no longer feel that God speaks through each of them as well as through the leader(s), part of God's presence is cut off; God's voice is muffled and the message skewed.

I believe that this has happened to a certain extent in the Church of the Saviour. If Gordon is a true prophetic voice,

shouldn't others simply rely on him and his vision? Can't the rest of us give up our questioning because he has the answers? I believe Gordon sensed this direction of things and tried to call us to answer and act for ourselves when he called for the dissolution of the church. Whether he truly stepped aside and withdrew his power to influence others so that we would have to stand on our own is still an open question for me.

Verna Dozier, in her wonderful little book, *The Dream of God*, suggests that the second of the three falls of humankind was the decision of the Israelites to ask for a king, rather than rely on God to provide leaders at moments when they were needed by the community. She says that God "offered the chosen people a way of life that would testify to a new possibility for human life, absolute trust in God, but the chosen people said, no, we want to be like all the nations."

What kind of community might constitute "a new possibility for human life", one where no one stands between us and God? Gordon writes that those who seek out the Servant Leadership School should "long to make a clean break with the ways of the world." Seekers say that our call is "to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives." It seems that Gordon envisions communities that exist with as few connections to mainstream organizations as possible, while Seekers envisions people from our community working within mainstream structures for justice and peace.

Is one vision right and the other wrong?

I am sorry that we will not be able to engage this question and others like it in the context of an ongoing Church of the Saviour. I regret that we did not enter into an open dialogue around such questions earlier. I believe we – the whole C of S – missed an opportunity to clarify and deepen our sense of God's call on our lives – individually and collectively. But we as Seekers still need to engage these questions.

No human voice can give us final answers. But we can listen to each other – the more diverse the voices, the better. And we can look in the New Testament for guidance. The letter to the Ephesians describes a community where people are called to speak truth to each other; they are all part of the same body; none is unimportant; all are to be heard. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear." Each person has the capacity to be an agent of God's grace.

As one voice among many, I would like to offer what I see as marks of a community of God, an expression of the body of Christ and where I see our community in living up to them.

A God-centered community welcomes and accepts each person who comes to it seeking company on their spiritual journey.

A God-centered community invites and challenges each of its members to live out of a sense of call or vocation. This is not a one-time thing; to paraphrase today's litany, we need to create a community which offers the invitation and challenge again and again.

A God-centered community knows how to hold its members accountable but leaves judgment to God.

A God-centered community values the gifts and encourages the contributions of every member; in such a community there is no human hierarchy where some are more valued than others. There is acknowledgment that people have different gifts and a celebration of the diversity of gifts.

A God-centered community recognizes that no matter how open it is, it is only one expression of God in the world. It seeks out connections with others who are different, to confront its own limited view of creation and to invite God to break through its "dim mirror".

A God-centered community seeks to live in full recognition of injustice in the world and in ourselves and to respond to the myriad manifestations of that injustice in concrete ways.

How does Seekers measure up? Let me give my impressions:

I think we are clear about the importance of living out of our sense of gifts and calls; I believe we are clear our worshipping community is a primary place of accountability for this. I think we need always to be awake to new ways and opportunities to challenge, encourage and hold each other accountable on our journeys.

I believe Seekers is truly committed to eliciting and valuing the gifts that each Seeker brings to community, regardless of their age, gender, race, sexual orientation, or other inherent characteristics. We are serious about the phrase, "leadership of the whole" and about avoiding hierarchical structures. There is always more to be learned and better work to be done.

I think Seekers as a community could do more to open ourselves to other expressions of God's presence in the world. Several individuals in the community are in touch with others who are different from us, but this does not often translate into experiences the community as a whole can share. The places we live and work are most often filled with people more like us than they are different. It takes real work, commitment and ingenuity to find opportunities to cross over cultural chasms. But I believe that unless we do find ways, we fail to experience the depth and breadth of God's presence in the world.

Related to the question of our exposure to diversity, I believe that Seekers, as a community, could do more to confront injustice in the world. Ofelia Ortega, a Cuban theologian, says that "If we eat the bread and partake of the cup and we are not committed to doing something for transformation, we are eating in an unworthy manner." I ask us

to ponder that challenge as we share communion this morning.

I am excited about the work before us. It feels like an invitation from God to experience the deepest hungers within us, as individuals and as Seekers. And from there, perhaps, we will discover our true vocation, which Frederick Bruechner defines as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Hunger meets hunger, and all are filled.