

Kathryn Tobias: Being Fed

Sermon delivered by Kathryn Tobias

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Being Fed

One of the things I love about this summer is that several of my neighbors and I have bought shares in Clagett Farm, in rural Maryland. Once a week, we go on an expedition to the farm to pick up our "farm share." This week it was four ears of corn, several tomatoes, a cucumber, garlic, basil, a bag of green and yellow beans, two yellow squashes, and as much extra okra, tomatoes, and basil as we wanted to pick and eat. After the drive, we all go to one of our three houses – one of them represented here today by my neighbors Dale and Liz – and pitch in to make a feast. The whole experience is food not only for the body, but also for the soul. There is nothing like good food, good company, the beauty of going to the farm, and the knowledge that a portion of the farm's bounty is going to a food bank, to leave us all feeling well fed.

Today's Gospel is also about being fed, and it is central, I think, to what I want to say about my experience of call to South Africa. Let me reread just a part of it:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever...For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him."

Not an easy text to talk about-and not one, most likely, on which all members of Seekers could agree – about its meaning, or even about its applicability to our lives. But as I reflect on it, it has everything to do with the question Billy posed to me, and one I've been asking myself: what part of you has

been grabbed by South Africa, and why is it so powerful?

When I was invited by Mary-Ann and Stephen Carpenter to spend two months or more at Tumelong Mission in Winterveld, South Africa, to help with income-generating projects, my heart leaped for joy. With encouragement from Seekers – including many individuals and Seekers collectively through the Growing Edge Fund – and with some rather uncharacteristic leaps of faith on my part, I found myself early last April working with the Tumelong Mission.

Let me say right away that Steve and Mary-Ann Carpenter and all of the Tumelong staff are in the business of nourishment. Tumelong, which means "place of faith" was originally started in 1939 at the request of an Anglican bishop, to provide care, education, and spiritual support in Lady Selborne, a black township northwest of Pretoria. In 1964, the apartheid government, under the Group Areas Act, forced all the black residents out of Lady Selborne and their homes were razed to make room for a new white suburb in this scenic area near Pretoria. Moreover, although the Tumelong mission was closed down in Lady Selborne, it continued to work among the former residents of Lady Selborne in Ga-Rankuwa and then Winterveld and surrounding areas. While Tumelong's original mission of "care and relief" continues, with the arrival of Dr. Stephen and Mary-Ann Carpenter about a decade ago, its mission has diversified and become manifold.

Tumelong's nutrition centers were started in 1991 to meet a need for food supplementation for malnourished children in the area. The need for this became clear when a Tumelong worker discovered 9-month-old twins, one of whom weighed only 2.1 kilograms-about 4 and a half pounds. The smallest twin died two days after the visit. Nutrition centers are opened in the homes of women with malnourished children, and the mothers learn skills in cooking nutritiously, monitoring their children's weight, planting vegetable gardens and using mother-child stimulation skills. By the end of 1992, 12

centers were scattered across the Odi-Moritele Districts of the North West Province. Once the objective was reached and the children in a nutrition center were gaining weight, the center was closed so that resources could be moved to another area of need. Then the nutrition workers discovered that children began losing weight after they were discharged from the program. Therefore, they began starting income-generating projects to give the mothers ongoing income that could feed their children. Today there are income-generating projects at 10 Tumelong sites, producing embroidered products, wire decorative items, cardboard furniture, jewelry, candles—because there is no electricity in most of Winterveld—bricks, fencing, telephone access, battery recharging, leather repair—and bread.

Bread – It seems right somehow that Tumelong's first venture into food production was to make bread. My job at Tumelong was to work with Grace Sicwebo, who was in charge of the income-generating projects. The idea was to see how – with my experience in small business-related work – I could help them become more self-sufficient. Every weekday, Grace would come by Mary-Ann's house at 8 a.m. and we would head out over the difficult, rutted roads of the District, to places with musical names like Lekgema, Soshanguve, Mabopane, Ga-Rankuwa, Madidi, Mathibe Stad – and Stinkwater.

One of my first tasks was to talk with Emily, the bread baker at the Stinkwater nutrition center, about how she might improve her project. I made some suggestions, and suddenly her face lit up. She seemed so happy just to have someone interested in what she was doing – and I felt much affirmed.

On another occasion, Emily took us to see a mother and baby. The baby was malnourished and very ill with kwashiorkor. We called Steve and the upshot was that Emily agreed to see to getting the mother and child to the hospital that afternoon or the next morning. Nevertheless, when I asked about it at the training session we were running the next morning, Emily

explained that something else was going on. Some of the elders believed that the cause of the problem was not malnutrition but witchcraft. So we talked about what could be done, and Grace said that perhaps the woman's grandmother, with whom the mother and child live, could be persuaded to let her go. In the meantime, Grace would get some nourishing formula to her. However, it was probably too late for that, she feared. If the child were not admitted to hospital, it would probably die.

That was when I shared with Grace the story of my godchild, Dima and his birth mother in Russia. As I thought about it then, it seemed to me that Dima had suffered in his very early years from emotional malnutrition-and, as it would take more than infant formula to save this baby, it would take more than the emotional equivalent of infant formula to restore Dima's health. Today, thankfully, miraculously, he and his father Bill are finding their way together toward emotional health – but it is a long and painful road uphill from a malnourished state.

Then there was my own nutritional state. As I wrote the stories emerging from my journey to many of you by e-mail, I got back some wonderful and encouraging messages. However, one of them from a colleague at work struck a different tone that surprised me. The whole situation sounded very depressing, he said.

Depressing? It had not struck me that way before. Here I was in a place where unemployment is at 60 percent, the AIDS infection rate is 25 to 30 percent, malnutrition and illness still take far too many children's lives, crime is rampant, and people die in automobile accidents every day. Moreover, the racist effects of apartheid have decades to go before they are no longer noticeable. Yet, I was not depressed.

On the contrary, I felt happier than I could remember having felt in a long, long time. I was having, I realized, the time of my life. Even people around Winterveld who had known me

such a short time had noticed it. Grace and her brother Sipho told me I looked and acted different-happier than when I arrived. Moreover, Donald Nghonyama said I looked younger than I had looked when he visited Washington last fall. I even had a good sense of humor, they said! I was getting the same kind of feedback by e-mail from siblings, friends and some of you. What was it? I asked myself in my journal, repeatedly. What was it about this place, this experience that left me feeling so lighthearted and joyful? Was it just the newness, or some special treatment I was getting because of being a foreigner? No, I felt deeply that it was something more fundamental.

I am still working on that question. However, I think it has something to do with nourishment, the kind of nourishment that comes from bread and wine that is simultaneously body and blood.

My father, Robert Tobias, and I share a deep and long-standing interest in theology. Dad is a Lutheran theologian who began his work in the ecumenical crucible of the fledgling World Council of Churches. He has spent much of his life weaving together threads of theology, spirituality and science to help shed light on our understanding of God. Having long followed the discoveries in particle physics, he took a special interest in the big news of a month ago: the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory had confirmed the existence of the 12th and last of the subatomic particles thought to exist. It is called the "tau neutrino," and, according to the Washington Post story, it has "little or no mass, no electrical charge, and it passes through matter like a ghost." Researchers took three years examining 6 million potential particle interactions to find four instances of the predicted signature of the tau neutrino, etched in an emulsion. The results of these experiments, scientists said, could "reverberate through scientific understanding of the smallest elements in nature to the fundamental composition of the universe, to scientists' search for a unifying theory of everything and why we're

here." Nobel laureate and quantum physicist Leon Lederman even called his book about the hunt for the smallest particle *The God Particle*.

What does all this have to do with bread and being fed? At some level, these subatomic explorations are part of our human effort to understand exactly how life happens-and how the spiritual and the material interact. What if bread and wine, rather than serving as a mere remembrance of Christ, are really God, down to the subatomic level, both really bread and wine and really body and blood? Moreover, if God is in all at that level, there is a connectedness among us. We are participants in a great ongoing feast with the rest of the world-and they with us. Therefore, we are fed by Christ and when we feed each other, we are fed by the act of feeding.

"God's presence within is the life of the material world," Dad said.

Easter Sunday afternoon in South Africa Steve Carpenter and I went to the little hospice at Lekgema to share a small communion service with the three patients who had to stay through the Easter weekend. Steve set up a small altar and he asked me to go and pick some flowers and put them in a cup. There are beautiful flowers growing around the hospice, planted by Mr. Kashweshwe, the gardener of Tumelong. I chose five or six of different colors and Steve found a wooden crucifix that had places for two candles. He had a Bible in Tswana, the language spoken by John, the only patient able to walk the few steps to our makeshift "chapel." John had cancer of the mouth, and a tracheotomy, so he could not speak, and his mouth and cheek were swollen out on the left side. I did not understand what Stephen was saying in Tswana, but I knew he was praying for John. As we sang a Tswana hymn, John spoke silent thanks through the tears running down his cheeks.

After the little service, we went to the bedside of a woman who also had cancer, and was mentally affected. She was lying

with her face to the wall when we came in singing a Tswana hymn. She joined in on the chorus, and then started her own song, and we joined her. Though her mind was in a twilight haze, she was still wide-awake to music – and we were all fed by its power. Take note, Jubilate!

Finally, we went to Suzie's room. Suzie had AIDS, and she lay staring at the door with a near-death gaze. We sang for her and she roused herself and motioned that she wanted help to sit up. She would not live through the next week, but for that brief Easter celebration, she was very much still alive, and it was a deep joy to share that moment of communion with her. Body and blood poured out for all of us.

"For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."

There is something deeply nourishing about being in a place where spiritual hunger pangs are not met with the faux food-power, status, possessions-that are often the objects of our own "pursuits of happiness." For Mary-Ann, attachments to these things are what get in the way of liberation, of real, satisfying spiritual nourishment. She says people outside of Winterveld often comment that her life must be hard-living there in an area plagued with carjackings, doing without electricity, running water and many other material comforts. "But it's not hard," she said. "It's easy." Give away your attachments and you will see how easy it is. Life itself can be given away, she would say. Death is just a continuation.

It sounds like the radical promise of today's gospel. "If anyone eats of this bread, she shall live forever."

When I looked back at my part of our group sermon last fall, I noticed that I was drawn to talk about our liturgical theme, "hungering for God." Well, I seem to have come full circle. And – thanks to the body of Christ, manifested here and in South Africa – I do not know when I have felt so well fed.