

Message: In the presence of God**What do you eat when you're hungry?**

If you're like me, there are times when I try to take the edge off my appetite with some M&M's or a candy bar, like Snickers. “You've heard that Snickers really satisfies? Well, I've learned differently. Sugary snacks taste good at the moment, but they offer no nutrition, and the high amount of sugar actually *increases* your appetite. Now, I'm not telling you to stop eating candy. I am saying you can't expect to fully satisfy hunger with junk food.

The same is true for spiritual hunger. You may not recognize this kind of hunger as easily. You won't be bothered by a grumbling stomach, but you might notice a grumbling attitude. You might notice that nothing in life brings you the happiness you crave. No matter how much stuff you buy or how many friends you have or how much time you spend on social media, you always find yourself wanting more. Why? Because just like candy, no material possession, no relationship, no drug or drink can fill you up.”¹

So what *can* satisfy this spiritual hunger? Well, Jesus called himself the “*bread of life*” (John 6:35). He promised that anyone who came to him would never go hungry. Jesus promised to fill our thirst for more (John 7:37-38). I didn't really understand what Jesus meant until I found myself dealing with some pretty big hurts back in 1999. Nothing I tried filled the hurt or the void. Through that time of despair, I learned to depend on my relationship with Christ in a way I never had before. That was the only real, spiritual food I could find.

I had to learn to trust God. It took time. I found myself turning to Jesus more and more often. And, as I did, I began to see how I could become whole in body, mind and spirit. Talking and listening to God was a big part of my transformation and it's something we all share.

It takes time to learn how to be honest with God. We don't like to share our weaknesses and vulnerabilities with anyone, even God. Job only asked God for two things: first, not to let his fear prevent him from hearing and responding to God's call; and second, for God to hear and

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/2000/sep/oct/13.4.html>

reply to what Job had to say (Job 13:20-22). We get so caught up with our own thoughts, anxieties and fears that we forget to listen to God. To make things worse, when we get the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we often ignore it. To compound the problem, we tend to treat God as a heavenly concierge, ready and willing to meet our every need. We lose sight of the fact that God’s will rules the universe, not ours.

It also takes time to learn how to “be still” (Psalm 46:10) in God’s presence. We’re uncomfortable sitting in silence. It reminds us of the loneliness we face each day. It doesn’t matter whether you have friends or not, you can still feel lonely. That’s why we do crazy things to be part of the “in crowd.” It’s why peer pressure is so effective: if you don’t go along with the crowd, you’re on the outside, isolated and alone. It doesn’t matter whether you’re married or not, you can still feel lonely. Spouses can take each other for granted, forget their first love – Jesus, has a role in their marriage, and grow apart. Living separate lives in the same household is lonely. Silence reminds us of loneliness, when we’re alone without any connection to anyone or anything else. It doesn’t matter whether you’re young or more well-seasoned, we all have the same response to being alone: we’re afraid. We’re made to be in relationship ... with God, family and others.

Solitude isn’t the same as loneliness. The difference is that we’re not alone when we’re before God. When we sit, stand, bow, kneel or lie on our face before God, we’re in the presence of the One who knows our fears, our faults and our feelings. The challenge is simple. When we’re in the invisible, intangible, inaudible and inscrutable presence of God, we don’t know what to expect. We can’t see the expression on God’s face or hear God’s voice or feel God’s touch the same way we do when we’re with a person. It can be confusing.

That doesn’t make solitude any less important. God desires to be known and has many ways of communicating with us if we’re willing to listen. When we’re quiet in God’s presence, important things happen: we learn more about ourselves. We learn more about God’s nature. We learn more about creation. We learn more about others. That’s because we can be in God’s presence at home or in nature or when we are with family or friends, or when we’re serving others.

Being in God’s presence has benefits. When we talk and listen to God, we’re more open and honest about the nature of our relationship. If we find ourselves praying honestly and openly more often, that means our relationship with God is growing and becoming deeper and stronger. God’s strength is working in and through us. Our life is filled with more meaning and purpose when we’re working with the Holy Spirit.

The quality of our prayer life determines the quality of our relationship with God. “Loretta Ross is a woman of deep prayer. She asks God the same question every morning, ‘What do you want me to tell the people?’ For many years the response she received was, ‘Tell the people that I love them.’ Then, one day, the response changed: ‘Tell the people that I miss them.’”²

Do you regularly spend time alone with God? Or are you too busy? Or is your mind too filled with the tasks, stress and troubles of your day? Or do you find the regular patterns of prayer don’t help? The best way to learn how to be in God’s presence is to try new forms of prayer, including different spiritual practices.

Since experience is the best teacher, this morning I invite you to join me in the spiritual practice of *imago divina* (divine imagery).

[*spiritual exercise – see Imago Divina.pdf*]

I thank God for opening our hearts and minds and feeding our spirits in a new way this morning. In Jesus’ name, amen.

² Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p12

Job 13:20-22 (NRSV)

Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me.

John 7:37-38 (NRSV)

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”