

# A DEEPER HUNGER

John 6:51-58

August 16, 2009

(Proper 15, Yr B)

**Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,  
and on these gifts of bread and wine.  
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,  
that we may be for the world the body of Christ  
redeemed by his blood.  
By your Spirit make us one with Christ,  
one with each other,  
and one in ministry to all the world.**

There was a retired coal miner in Blue Jay, West Virginia, who loved to have company. He'd see someone at the post office, or the Kroger store in Beaver, or maybe at church on Sunday, and he'd bring them home for supper. "Mabel," he'd say to his wife. "You've got company." And Mabel, who lived the better part of her life in the kitchen, I think, would say, "What'd you say, Chet?" She was hard of hearing. About as hard as one can get. And Chester, her husband, would just sort of mumble when he talked. Always reminded me of "Hillbilly Bear"

(on the old Saturday morning cartoons). So he'd take a deep breath and try it again. "Company, Mabel ... I said we've got company!"

No answer.

"Mabel?" he'd shout. "Yes dear." (You could hear this all over Blue Jay.) "Mabel," he'd say, "are you decent?"

"Last time I looked," she'd *holler* back from the kitchen. And he would shout back, "I asked the preacher to join us for supper." And we'd go through the door and into the kitchen. And Mabel would say, "Oh, it's the preacher! ... Why Chet," she'd say, "You should have invited him to have *supper* with us." And Chet would sigh and say, "That's a good idea, Mabel." And ten minutes later, Mabel would say, "Come and get it!" And Chester would pray. And every time he sat down for a meal with his family and friends he'd take bread -- a roll, a biscuit, a piece of cornbread, or a cracker, whatever was there. And he'd break it in two and say, "Let us break bread." And then he'd pass it to the person on either side.

And for the next thirty minutes, Chet and Mabel'd tell stories -- stories about the good old days, mostly, when

they were little children. Mabel would tell how her father came to Raleigh County, USA from his home in Pennsylvania. Came with the lumber company for which Blue Jay was named. And she'd tell stories about her sisters and brothers and all the mischief they got into as children.... She was "a *city-girl*," according to Chester. Because she grew up in Blue Jay. (A little lumber camp, mind you, with fifty houses). But *he* was different. More down-to-earth he claimed. Because he grew up on a farm in Monroe county with its rolling hills and covered bridges. And he'd tell stories about life on the farm -- putting up hay, mending fences, chasing cows out of the corn field -- that kind of thing.

And one of his favorite stories was about a woman who went to visit some folks who lived on a farm, though he wasn't sure where. And while she was there, he said, she noticed a pig limping around the backyard. And she noticed that the pig had a peg leg. A wooden leg, mind you. "And being a city girl, like Mabel," he said, "she'd never seen anything *like that at all*."

"What happened to that pig?" she asked the farmer. And the farmer said, "Well that's old Betsy. She's a

wonderful pig. One night," said the farmer, "the house caught fire and she oinked so loud she woke us up, and we got the fire truck here in time to save the house." And the woman who'd come to visit said, "Wow! That's really something!" But the old farmer went on. "Oh, ma'am," he said, "that's not the half of it. My little daughter, my youngest, was playing out here one day and fell into the pond. And old Betsy there squealed and oinked so loud that she got our attention, and we were able to get the child out of the pond just in time." And the woman said, "Oh, my word, that's just *amazing!*"

She stood there for a moment admiring that three-legged pig. And then she turned to the farmer and said, "That's such an amazing story. But I still don't understand why the pig has a wooden leg." And the farmer said, "Well shucks, ma'am, when you've got a pig as special as that, you don't want to eat him all at once!"

Isn't that strange? The one who saves them, the one who comes to the rescue, is the one who will nourish and feed them. ✘ That story was never one of my favorites, believe me. It's just a little too gruesome for the likes of us shy and sensitive people. But then, farm life is messy. It's

both messy and sacred, all at the same time. Because the farmyard is a place of sacrifice, a place of slaughter and death. And yet, from that same sacrifice comes nourishment and life.

It is a bit messy, that story, so let me tell you another ... about a little boy and his grandfather. (Does that sound more like it?) The little boy's parents were having a night out, taking a date, I suppose, or out with friends, maybe. So they called the child's grandfather to baby-sit for the evening. Although, he doesn't like to call it that. "The boy's six years old," he said. "I'm not sitting with a *baby*. I'm just here for company's sake." So they went out for the evening. And the grandpa and the six-year-old kept each other company.

And they had a wonderful time, I guess, until it was time for supper that evening. For the grandfather just couldn't find anything the boy wanted to eat. "How about some roast beef?" he said. "We could have roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy." But the boy shook his head. "What about some fish and chips?" said his grandpa. "I could deep fry some fish in my special batter and even make hushpuppies. Does that sound good?"

"Nope."

"What about hot dogs and root beer?" The boy shook his head. "Hamburgers?"

"No."

"Tacos."

"No."

"Pizza!" said the grandfather. "How about some pizza?"

The boy shook his head, "No." And that's how it was. He didn't want anything. And finally the boy's grandpa said, "I give up. You don't like roast beef, you tell me. You don't like fish. You don't like hot dogs, or hamburgers, or tacos or pizza. Tell me, Jonathan, what do you like?" And turning his innocent blue eyes on his grandfather, the little boy said, "I like **you**, grandpa!"

There are two ways to look at that, you know. Either these people were raising a six-year-old cannibal ... or it was enough for the child simply to be with his grandfather, someone whose love and devotion was like

food, in a way. For that love would nourish his heart and fill him with life ... for years to come.

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It's all here in the gospel, you know -- the story of someone who's a bit like that little boy's grandpa, I think. Someone who invites us and calls us to come to the table and then somehow becomes the bread that sustains us, the food that brings life to our heart and soul. But this gospel story isn't tidy and neat. It can't be reduced to a verse on a greeting card or a moral handbook. Because it's messy. Really. It tells of sacrifice and death... And yet, from that same sacrifice comes *real life* and *real nourishment* -- the one thing that saves us from Death, from the *real death*, I mean, the death of the soul.

Jesus said it in church. In the synagogue. On the Sabbath! He was back "home" in Capernaum teaching folks about God in the synagogue there. Talking about Moses and all of their ancestors wandering round in the desert trying to get home. And he spoke of the bread they ate, the manna from heaven -- this wonderful gift God gave them for strength and nourishment. **Your ancestors ate the bread of heaven**, he said. **And then they died.** Not right away, mind you. But in the long run they did. Of course they died. Doesn't everyone sooner or later?

But then he said -- right there in the synagogue -- he said, **I am the living bread that came down from heaven. And whoever eats this bread will live forever. Oh, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is ... my flesh.**

That's when some of the folks there started to get really uncomfortable, I think. Things were beginning to get a little messy, they thought, with all this talk about eating flesh. But there was more. He said, **Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you're not really living. You're as lifeless as a corpse! ✕ Ah, but**

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**those who eat my flesh and drink my blood are full of life, eternal life... They abide in me and I in them.**

It didn't make sense. How could he say such a thing? It was gruesome and messy.... Here was a this man, this traveling rabbi, talking about himself as if he would be slaughtered like a fatted calf or a lamb on a farm. **A life sacrificed so that others could be nourished and fed!**

But isn't that what happened? Jesus the Lamb was sacrificed. Slaughtered he was on a strange sort of altar in the shape of a cross. And even though it was a place of slaughter and death, it was all for life -- that there might be life. Not just for him in the garden that morning on the third day. But for you and me. Jesus became a living sacrifice -- the One who nourishes you and me and the Church, the whole Church, with his own flesh and blood. And it all has something to do with something he said there in the synagogue that morning. And what he said was **abide. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.**

The good people there in Capernaum that morning were just horrified by the very thought of drinking blood.

That's why they had all the Kosher laws -- laws handed down through the ages that said that their food must be prepared a certain way. In a way that respected and honored the life of the animal. Because, for them, the blood was its life. And why wouldn't they think that? If an animal loses enough blood it loses its life.

And isn't that what Jesus was saying? This is my blood which was poured out for you. Drink you, all of it, in remembrance of me. Take my life into your life, into your self, and I will abide in you. I will dwell in you. I will live my life in your life. And the life I will give you is real life -- a life that is stronger even than death. ✠

In a few moments we will pray **the Great Thanksgiving**. And we'll break the bread and bless the cup at the table of the Lord. But for us it isn't just bread and it isn't just a cup of glorified grape juice. For us, the Church, it is the body of Christ broken for us. And this is the blood of Christ shed for us. And when we take it and eat it, **we are receiving his life into ours**. Really. It isn't just a symbol. It isn't just a ritual. It's more than that -- *so much more than that*.

It's what we call a **sacrament**. A sacred act. Which means it isn't just something we do, mind you. It's something Jesus our Lord does. It may look like we're the ones doing all the work here. But the truth is the Lord himself is our host. And he invites us to come and dine at his table. To come and be fed and filled in communion with him and with the whole household of God.

But here at the table something strange and wonderful happens. The One who calls and invites us to come to his table, is the One who becomes our nourishment, our food... Does that sound like a stretch? For some of us it does. It's hard to believe what we can't see or feel or taste, for that matter. Our senses say, "This is bread. This is wine. This is grape juice." But faith says it's more. Faith says this is Christ -- the living Christ. And somehow, in some way that we may never fully understand, **when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we share in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

So when you come, remember that this is a place that is down-to-earth and yet holy. It's a time to come into the presence of Christ himself. And let him be the nourishment of your heart and soul, so that you may be

bread in his hands to feed the hearts and souls of others who are so hungry for God.

I know a preacher -- retired a few years ago -- and he talks about growing up in the south, in an old farmhouse somewhere not too far from the railroad tracks. And he says he can remember a number of mornings waking up slowly, all groggy with sleep, and going into the kitchen for breakfast. And there'd be a strange, ugly-looking, poorly dressed man there at the table eating - just eating away. And he'd say, "I was scared. I was scared of him." And when the man left, he'd go to his mother and say, "Mom, who was that?"

And she'd say, "Well his name was Henry, and he said he was hungry."

"Well, where'd he come from?"

"He came down the railroad tracks," she would say.

People called them hobos then. They walked the tracks begging, maybe even stealing, and getting what they could to stay alive. And he said, "They would stop by their house 'cause it was close to the tracks. And they'd see

some mark, some sign that some other hobo had left there that said ***this was a house where you could come to the table, whoever you were, and be fed.***

“So they’d stop by our house,” he said. “And they were there sitting in our kitchen eating what we had to eat, just eating it like they’d never have another meal.” And he said, “I’d say, *Mamma, weren’t you scared?*”

And she’d say, “He was hungry.”

“Well, I was scared of him.”

“Well, he was hungry.”

That’s how it is here, in *this* house, you know. It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter where you’ve been or what you’ve done (or even what you’ve left undone). It doesn’t matter how you’re dressed. Or how you feel... All that matters is that you’re hungry -- hungry for the real Bread of Life -- for the One who is our nourishment and our strength. Jesus calls you to come to the table that he might fill you with life-giving Bread. The One true bread that will feed the deeper hunger and give you life.

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This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

*Benen, Ob|SB*

