

“O Taste and See”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, November 1, 2020

All Saints Day – Psalm 34

O taste and see how gracious the Lord is, blest is the one who trusteth in him. O taste and see. Taste, because of your spiritual hunger. It has been said many times how people today are hungering for spiritual things. For walks in the woods. For quiet time to connect with the sacred within and without. To slow down the pace so that the voice of God might be heard above the noise of a demanding life. Since the pandemic, our local walking trails have been filled with people, with families, with lots of dogs, and a few horses, as people have taken to the outdoors to find spiritual refreshment.

One of our communion hymns begins with the line, ‘You satisfy the hungry heart.’<sup>1</sup> The hymn speaks to the spiritual hunger of our hearts, not a physical hunger. And our spiritual hunger is met in the elements of the bread and the wine of Jesus’ last supper. During holy communion, when we eat the piece of bread, and when we drink that sip of wine, or as in the United Church’s tradition, concord grape juice, it’s not about meeting our physical hunger, but about meeting our spiritual hunger.

In the Bible there are several references to God’s word as satisfying the spiritual hunger within us. From Psalm 119:103, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” From Proverbs 24:13, “My child, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul.” And from Hebrews 6:5, “and have tasted the goodness of the word of God.”

Christine Paintner, an early church historian, tells us how this spiritual hunger resulted in a monastic movement that began centuries ago. She writes, “In the third to sixth century desert landscape of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Arabia, a powerful movement was happening. Christian monasticism began flowering in response to a call to leave behind “the world.” ... These spiritual seekers, who came to be known as the desert fathers and mothers, withdrew from a society where the issue of human relationships, power, and material possessions ran counter to their sense of the sacredness of life.”<sup>2</sup>

The Desert Fathers and Mothers developed spiritual practices over time that became sources of wisdom for the many who followed them. This wisdom was gathered into collections known as ‘Sayings of the Desert Fathers.’ These spiritual fathers and mothers, anchored in the Word of God, would give to those who came asking, a ‘word’ for their spiritual journey.

Paintner fills us in on how this happened, “When a novice approaches one of the ammas (Mothers) or abbas (Fathers) and says, ‘Give me a word,’ he or she is not asking for either a command or a solution, but for a communication that can be received as a stimulus to grow into fuller life ... this tradition of asking for a word was a way of seeking something on which to

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<sup>1</sup> “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart”, Voices United Hymnal #478, Words Omer Westendorf, Music Robert E. Kreutz.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Valters Paintner, *Desert*, ix.

ponder for many days, weeks, months, sometimes even a whole lifetime. The word was often a short phrase to nourish and challenge the receiver. The word was meant to be wrestled with and slowly grown into.”<sup>3</sup>

Certainly today, when congregations gather to worship, we sing, we pray, and we listen to a sermon that opens up the Word. In John 12:21, a man says to Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” There are many pulpits around the world that have these very words printed on a plaque that the preacher sees every time they step into that pulpit to preach. And the preacher’s prayer is that yes, the people will have a ‘word from God.’ But even if we get that ‘word’ on a Sunday morning, are our lives too fast paced and noisy to hang on to it any longer than a Sunday morning?

A commentary reflects on this challenge of trying to stay focused on God in the midst of the busyness of our lives: “How do you “bless the Lord, my soul” while listening to the traffic on one of the busiest streets ... just outside your office window? How do you “bless the Lord, my soul” when the preschool kids take over the gym outside your office door? How do you “bless the Lord, my soul” when there are more to-do items on the day’s list than there are hours in the day? What is this thing called life that gets in the way of my relationship with God?”<sup>4</sup>

Psalm 34 specifically points to the broken-hearted, the crushed in spirit. “The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.” To these people, the psalm writer says, “Open your mouth and taste how good God is.” The Moderator of the United Church of Canada, the Right Rev. Richard Bott, posted on his Facebook page on Friday this observation, “Have you ever read a piece of scripture out loud, and found yourself dripping with tears because of it? Yeah. That.”<sup>5</sup> The response to his post was clear to me – many people knew what he was talking about based on all the crying emojis. So many people knew what it meant to be reduced to tears after reading a verse from the Bible.

Me, I had to go back and *remember* where that had happened to me. But then, I began to remember. There were some phrases from the Bible that had truly met my deep spiritual hunger, and I had tasted those words with the salt of my tears. From Revelation 21: And God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more.” And from Psalm 42 – ‘As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. To you alone does my spirit yield.’” But you know, I had to think about this. I had to dig down and remember those scriptures that brought to me these transformative moments of connection to God, moments of healing, moments that brought such a deep peace. Moments that fed my spiritual hunger for God’s presence.

The saints didn’t become saints because they were ‘perfect’ people. They became saints because of their trust in God. They took the Word and made it their food to live by. As Psalm 34 says, “The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.”

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Valters Paintner, *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings*, (United States of America: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Pastoral Perspective, 226.

<sup>5</sup> Right Rev. Richard Bott, from his personal Facebook page, posted, October 28, 2020.

Where *our* 'word' fades,  
where *our* 'word' gets tired,  
where *our* 'word' fails,  
where *our* 'word' dies,

the Word of the Lord to the broken hearted,  
the Word of the Lord to the crushed in spirit,  
the Word of the Lord to those who are suffering,

*this word,*  
never fades,  
never tires,  
never fails  
never dies.

*This is the Word that we taste with our tears.*

*O God, give me a word.*

O taste and see how gracious the Lord is.

Blest is the one who trusteth in him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.