

Ordinary water, ordinary food (John 4:5-42)

How do we wrap our minds around hunger?

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According to the United Nations World Food Programme there are 795 million people who do not have enough food to live an active, healthy life. This means that one out of nine people on our planet will not have enough to eat today--or tomorrow, or the day after that. We live in a world blessed with God's abundance but cursed by our inability to provide for the most basic needs of God's people. How do we even begin to wrap our minds and, more importantly, our hearts around this urgent issue?

John's Gospel points us in the right direction: Jesus. Following his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus' disciples seek to address the problem of hunger. They assume Jesus is hungry and urge him to eat something. But Jesus has food that they do not know about: to do the will of the one who sent him and to complete God's work.

Just as Jesus uses a conversation about ordinary water to proclaim the life-giving gift of water that brings eternal life, so does he use a conversation about ordinary food to speak of that which truly satisfies. This work is nothing less than the gospel of Jesus Christ, feeding the world's people with life and love, forgiveness and freedom.

This should come as no surprise. Our varied sacramental theologies all have this in common: Jesus takes what is ordinary and uses it for his extraordinary purposes. Simple water, with God's word, becomes an eternal spring that washes us clean and never runs dry. Simple bread and wine, with God's word, become forgiving food for the journey, Christ's own body and blood given and shed for us.

We make a mistake, however, if we turn this into a purely “spiritual” exercise. For just as Jesus uses the ordinary to make real the extraordinary, so does he use the extraordinary to move us back into the ordinary. Being washed in baptism and fed in the Lord’s Supper do not move us out of this world and its brokenness. Rather, the sacraments drive us precisely into the everyday realities of this world and its people.

The reaper, Jesus tells us, is already gathering fruit for eternal life. To what end? Rejoicing. Jesus calls us to a feast set for all people--a feast that is both sacramental and ordinary, that fills us and all people with the food of eternal life *and* the food our material bodies need for daily thriving.

In a previous call, I was blessed to work with people who caught a sense of this vision, creating a ministry called Harvest of Grace Café. It was a simple, beautiful ministry, one that was certainly not unique to that congregation.

Every month, we offered a free meal for the community. The goal was not simply to share food, but to create community in an environment centered on a fantastic meal made with love and served with dignity. People came for many reasons: some out of hunger, others out of loneliness, all with the hope of finding food for the body and food for the soul. The meals were not designed as an opportunity for the privileged to serve those in need; they were events in which such distinctions were erased through simple acts of eating in fellowship. The ordinary became extraordinary in the most ordinary of ways.

How do we begin to wrap our minds and hearts around problems such as world hunger? By remembering the extraordinary, saving acts of Jesus Christ, who has wrapped the heart and mind of God around this world in an embrace without end.