

The Famished Heart - Communion

Matthew 4: 1-11

Bruce Springsteen released one of his most popular songs in 1980 to reflect the turmoil and struggles experienced by many in the 1970's – a decade of double-digit inflation, gas shortages, the Iranian hostage crisis, and global turmoil. The song tells the story of the restlessness of the era from the opening stanza: “Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack, I went out for a ride and I never went back. Like a river that don't know where it's flowing I took a wrong turn and I just kept going. Everybody's got a hungry heart.” How many here are familiar with “Hungry Heart?”

What you may not know about the song is that Springsteen based it upon Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous poem, “Ulysses,” where the mythical hero describes his own restless life:

*I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much I have seen and known....
I am a part of all that I have met.*

I especially love that last line: “I am a part of all that I have met.”

Are Tennyson's words not true? Though we are created by biological design, are we not more than a cluster of genetic material? Are we not the sum of our experiences in life, both the good and the bad? I think whether in the lines of Tennyson's poem or Springsteen's song, the "hungry heart" is simply another way of saying that we are tempted, and our temptations restlessly drive us into places we do not wish to go. But beyond the "hungry heart" of temptation is what I call the "famished" heart, which are those times we find ourselves in places of absolute and hopeless despair. What is a famished heart?

In 1993 South African photojournalist Kevin Carter travelled with a United Nations rescue mission to Sudan in the middle of that nation's worst famine. As thousands of starving Sudanese made their way to a food distribution center, Carter saw a dying little girl crawling in the mud who had stopped for a moment of rest, and as she did a large, hooded vulture landed near her about 10 to 15 feet away. Carter took a carefully composed shot of the horrible scene and chased off the bird, but then walked away because he had been told not to touch the children for fear of transmitting disease. Carter explained that at the time of the photo Sudanese men, women, and children were dying at a rate of 20 an hour as they tried to reach the distribution point, and he accepted that reality.

The photograph was sold to the New York Times, and after its worldwide publication, Carter was subject to a literal firestorm of criticism for walking away from the child. The next year the photo won the Pulitzer Prize because of how it illuminated the situation in the Sudan, but Carter could not shake either the criticism or his own guilt. Four months after winning the most distinguished award in photojournalism, Kevin Carter took his own life in a field where he once played as a child, leaving a note which in part read: "I'm really, really sorry. The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist...I am

haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain...of starving or wounded children.” Millions of Sudanese died because of famished bodies, but Kevin Carter died because of a famished heart, a heart emptied by the horrors of life and the subsequent despair at his own inaction. Kevin Carter, like so many others, felt hopelessly alone in his pain and despair, but, unknown to him, he wasn't alone: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came ... Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God,, and serve only him." ' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

The story of Christ's wilderness temptation in the gospel of Matthew immediately followed Jesus' baptism and God's declaration of his Messianic identity: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* As God affirmed Christ's Messianic identity, Jesus immediately began to express that identity in a way completely opposite of Jewish expectations. Instead of embracing the glory and power of a nationalistic Messiah, Jesus deprived himself of companionship and ordinary sustenance for an extended period in the wilderness, to the point of being “famished.”

The Greek word for famished in Matthew's gospel is “epeinasen,” a form of the Greek word “painaio,” which means extreme hunger or deprivation. It was in one of Christ's weakest and most despairing moments that Satan tempted him with three shortcuts that would bypass the cross and immediately end Christ's suffering: “command these stones...throw yourself down...fall down and worship me.” Christ provides three responses to the three temptations, but they all focus on one idea: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God...Do not put the Lord

your God to the test...Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” All three of Christ’s responses are about God and what God expects of all who believe – that we completely focus our lives upon God, trusting that God will provide all things, even in times of extreme deprivation. As the temptation story closes, God refreshes and restores the Son through the ministry of God’s own spiritual servants: “And suddenly angels came, and waited on him.”

Christ’s long journey into the wilderness represents those extreme moments of dependency when all that is left to us is the presence of God’s love. But more than just God’s presence and healing love, God also shapes us in our most famished times. Protestant theologian JJ Packer expresses this idea with eloquence when he writes, “God uses...pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. To live with your ‘thorn’ uncomplainingly — that is, sweet, patient, and free in heart to love and help others, even though every day you feel weak — is true sanctification. It is true healing for the spirit. It is a supreme victory of grace.”

Christ’s victory against temptation in the wilderness presaged that moment when we would once again see the famished Messiah, as he prayed in the garden just before his victory over death and sin. Just like the beginning of his ministry, Christ’s focus in his despair was the same, a focus that we hear in the closing of his prayer for deliverance – “yet not what I want, but what you want.” What God wants is the answer to what we want, and as we come to the table on this first Sunday of the Lenten season, we must let God’s will fill the emptiness of our famished hearts.

Bruce Springsteen was right – everybody has a hungry heart. That is the nature of sin and temptation – but everybody also has a table of grace, prepared for us by Christ, so that we may never be famished. Are we willing to reach out in our wildernesses this morning, wherever or whatever they may be? Here we meet our Lord face to face, and in doing so we become, like Tennyson’s Ulysses, a part of what we experience – our famished hearts are filled, and our lives are fitted to our Lord’s purpose.