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Feeding the Soul

Ephesians 3:19

We all go through times when the fullness of human life seems painfully remote. The Civil War General, William Tecumseh Sherman, was confronted with such a moment after defeating a Confederate force led by General William Hardee at the Battle of Bentonville, North Carolina. General Hardee's son, Willie, died in the battle. When Sherman was told of General Hardee's loss, he went to his room and wept. This report touched a very deep nerve within Sherman. It brought to the surface his unresolved grief over the death of his own son who was also named Willie. Sherman then wrote a letter to the Confederate general:

And now, General we have both lost our sons of the same name. Though my Willie was too young to ride, it was the war that killed him just as surely as the war has killed yours. How unnatural is this age when, in violation of God's grand stratagem, the young are unbodied of their souls before the old. In Ecclesiastes it is said (as I blunder to remember it), "As some leaves fall and others grow in their place, so too with the generations of flesh and blood, one dies and another is born." I can imagine you wishing in your grief that God had spared your Willie and taken you instead, for that is what I wished—I mean, when I lost my Willie. I curse our inverted time, when so many thousands of us, fathers and mothers, have given our children to this damned war of the insurrection. I look forward to the day this nation is again united and the natural order is restored and our generations die one again appropriate to their god-given ranks. At that time, my dear General, I hope we may meet and commiserate as fellow soldiers and survivors. Desiring that you accept my sincere condolences, I am, sir, your humble obedient servant, William Tecumseh Sherman, Major General (E. L. Doctorow, *The March*, pages 317-318).

Sherman's letter expresses the intensity of his hunger for a different kind of world than the one in which he lives. He is haunted by the unnatural character of a world that so blatantly contradicts God's intention for the fullness of human life.

The gospel writer addresses this concern in the 6th chapter of John. There we read of people who are desperate to experience the world that God intends. Jesus looks out at a huge crowd that has gathered to listen to his message. He turns to Philip and says, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat (John 6:5)?" Philip assumes that Jesus is asking about the logistics of securing, preparing, and delivering food for five thousand people. He immediately begins to estimate the financial cost of such an undertaking. The cost clearly exceeds the resources that are available to Jesus and his disciples.

But Philip does not recognize that Jesus' question is moving in another direction. Jesus better than anyone else understands why this huge multitude has followed him into the hills. Most have not come because they are looking for a free lunch. They have come because they are hungry for a

different kind of world. The crowd has not followed Jesus into the hills in search of the bread that feeds their bodies, but the bread that feeds their souls.

Philip worries about the scarcity of resources that are available for this task. But Jesus has come to celebrate the abundance of God's resources to meet the needs of those who hunger for a different kind of world. This is a meal that blesses people in ways that no one expects. There is so much more food than the huge crowd can consume. When it is over they know that this teacher has given them what they need most. He has fed their souls. They had experienced the blessing that is described in Ephesians 3 where Paul prays that his people may undergo the transformation of their inner nature.

When I went to visit my grandparents as a child I was always struck by the obvious scarcity of their resources. They lived in a small house with no modern conveniences. They were in their sixties before they added indoor plumbing. They never moved much beyond that level of luxury. They never owned an automobile. They grew most of their food the old fashioned way without the benefit of mechanized farming. The house was often filled with the smells of home grown tomatoes and freshly baked bread. I remember how hard my grandmother worked. I thought of her when I read a description by Russ Otey of the life his grandmother led. He writes:

In any given day she would bake biscuits from scratch, cook three meals on a wood stove, bring in water from a well serviced only by a bucket on a rope, wring a chicken's neck and fix several meals from the bird parts including giblets, liver gizzards, and neck. In the summer she would be in charge of the vegetable garden, followed by "canning" vegetables in copious amounts in mason jars. She collected eggs from the henhouse, made butter with a hand churn, created beautiful quilts from scraps of cloth, chopped wood, and made her children go to school. On Sundays she went to worship, and, until the 1950s, traveled there by horse and wagon. Every day she read Scripture and sang hymns as she labored. Her life was in some ways brutal and oppressed and chock-full of the ignorance and racism of the time and place, but in other ways she was one of the freest and most joyful persons I have known. One hymn she sang or hummed often was "Take the name of Jesus with you, child of sorrow and of woe. It will joy and comfort give you; take it then, where'er you go (*Journal for Preachers*, pages 10-11)."

The life of my grandmother was a lot like that. Her faith was at the center of everything she did. I still remember one visit when I could not have been more than six years old. After washing clothes in a tub with a hand cranked ringer, she took me with her to hang the wet clothes to dry on the clothes line. I was not big enough to be of any help on this job. But she had something different in mind for me. As she hung the clothes she taught me the 23rd Psalm. She was offering me the food that would feed my soul. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul." There was a subtext to what my grandmother was doing that day which was not apparent to me until many years later. We were on a journey together of which I knew nothing. What she knew and I did not was that her son (my father) was dying. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me."

Perhaps the most vivid memory for me was Sunday dinner in my grandparents' home. Its abundance was in stark contrast with the scarcity of their material possessions. The depth of gratitude conveyed in the prayer before dinner suggested the sacramental nature of that meal. There was always so much more than we could eat. This was a sign of the presence of the One who came to feed our souls.