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The Bread of Life
John 6:35

Last December Parker Palmer was interviewed about the spiritual roots of the present economic crisis. He pointed to an aspect of the crisis that is often overlooked. He said:

There are a lot of people... who knew, not just instinctively, but factually, what was going on. There were people who actually understood the mathematics behind these bogus subprime mortgages. What was it that kept those people from saying the emperor has no clothes? Well, I can name at least two emotions. One is fear of what happens to whistleblowers in our society... And the other emotion of course is the emotion called greed, which is that somehow I have not only a right, but an absolute need to claim more than my share out of this, and if someone else suffers I really don't give a hoot.

Now, those have to do with the inner dynamics of a person's life, and it truly baffles me as to why in this society we continue to think that all reality and all power in terms of what drives human affairs lies in these external objective factors like policy and institutional arrangement and money when in fact there is an equally real and powerful set of drivers of human history that reside within us in the dynamics of the human heart (Interview with Krista Tippett, *NPR Transcript of Radio Program*, July 23, 2009, page 5).

Palmer's point was clearly understood by one of the people who created modern capitalism, a theologian and church reformer named John Calvin. Calvin understood human sin and disobedience as a chaotic force in the world. When the selfishness of the human heart is given free reign disorder spreads. Calvin would not have been surprised by the economic chaos created by the near collapse of financial markets last Fall. He would have pointed out that this is what happens when a society comes to believe that earthly bread is all that matters. It is through the heavenly bread that God provides in Jesus Christ that the destructive effects of human sin are overcome and order is restored.

In the 6th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus has a running series of encounters with people who are fixated on earthly bread. When Jesus feeds the crowd that has followed him into the hills of Galilee the impact on the people is electrifying. They move immediately to enthrone him as king. They see him as the instrument by which they can control the political and economic machinery of their time. It is all about getting more than their share. Jesus withdraws further up the mountain to protect himself from those who seek to manipulate him.

The same group catches up with Jesus the next day in a synagogue in Capernaum. Once again they seek to use Jesus for their own selfish ends. They are blind to who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus tells them that they should not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life. This food comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35)." Jesus is the bread which can empower them to overcome the destructive effect of their selfishness and greed. He is the bread which can bring wholeness to human beings and the

societies in which they live and work.

Hans Mol has described a teaching moment that he experienced in a Nazi concentration camp in Germany in 1944. He was transferred to a cell where there were two other prisoners. One was a Norwegian sailor who had been caught ferrying refugees who were trying to escape to England. He had no more than a primary education and was cut off from his wife and three children in Norway. The other man in the cell was a very sophisticated German with two doctorates. His career had been meteoric. He had become a very influential judge and member of the Nazi party in the German city of Dessau. He was in the camp because the Nazis had caught him embezzling money from an orphan fund he administered.

The food delivered to the cells was never adequate. The general practice was for the prisoners to take turns making the first selection of the meager rations. Sometimes one piece of bread would be larger than the others. But the judge ignored the rule and put himself in charge of the distribution. He always took the largest portion of bread as if he had a right to it. Mol noticed that the uneducated Norwegian had a very different outlook. He was a man of natural dignity who respected other people. Mol described what he learned from these men in the following words:

The judge was always talking about himself, his accomplishments, his predicaments, as though he was desperate for someone to allay his anxieties by admiration. He was sorry for himself, basically because the world, even the Nazi world, had not let him get away with self-aggrandisement and self-enrichment. I felt drawn to the Norwegian, because he seemed to be the wisest of us all. All three of us were hungry, undernourished and underweight. Yet he had managed to rise above it all and not let it get to him. It was this balance of mind, this equanimity, serenity, mental calmness which proved to be more precious than a thicker piece of bread. Slowly it began to dawn on me that if I were to survive the holocaust, trust in the heavenly bread represented in Christ was more essential than a desperate obsession with a slightly larger crust (Hans Mol, *Calvin for the Third Millennium*, pages 68-69).

In the 18th chapter of 2 Samuel we read about the destructive consequences of a life given over to claiming more than one's share. The biblical writer tells us that when King David stole another's man's wife and then murdered him to cover up his sin, his family and his nation were pushed into chaos and disorder. The prophet Nathan saw it coming when he declared that the sword would never depart from David's house. Events moved faster than David could control. He was confronted with a coup led by his son Absalom which forced him to flee from the capitol and to raise an army to take back the throne. The disintegration of David's family was dragging the nation into civil war.

David understood that the destructive progress of chaos and disorder was the consequence of his sin. He had disobeyed God and violated the trust of his family and the trust of the nation. In this passage David demonstrates his repentance and desire to make amends. He sets out to restore the broken relationships in his family so that the wounds of the nation can be healed. He is seeking the bread of heaven which can overcome the effects of his sin. As David prepares for the decisive battle against the forces of Absalom he gives very explicit instructions about his son. He says, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom (2 Samuel 18:5)." David makes sure that everyone hears this order. For David, winning the battle would be a hollow victory unless he could restore his family and repair the damage created by his sin.

But David's lead commander Joab does not understand David's commitment to restoring his family and nation to wholeness. For him it was all about maximum military advantage and producing

earthly bread. When he finds Absalom hanging precariously from a tree he does what he knows will feed David's base of power. He executes the treasonous young prince on the spot. David's heart is broken.

It is those who like David struggle with the dynamics of the human heart who are ready to hear the promises of Jesus in the 6th chapter of John. The hunger beneath all hungers is not for earthly bread, but for the One who is the bread of life.