

BREAKING GROUND
ENDLESS DESIRE

Texts on Sunday, February 17, 2013

Genesis 3: 1-7; Luke 4: 1-4

When Jesus says, "It is written, *One does not live by bread alone,*" he is quoting from *Deuteronomy*. There, an ancient author lyrically re-imagines Moses offering a long, beautiful sermon just before his people enter the Promised Land. Moses promises that they are about to

eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that God has given you. . . . When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them . . . and your silver and gold is multiplied . . . then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . . Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you . . . by letting you hunger, then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors knew, to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8, selections)

To humble you and test you. . . by letting you hunger. Have you been there? Have you not been there? Who is "you" anyway? Just you-you, humbled and tested in your body, in your need? Or you-Riverside, hungering and testy, grumbling, wandering through a dry land, uncertain of the way forward? Or you-African-Americans, who have a story to tell the nations, what it was for hundreds of years to be humbled and tested, hungering and thirsting for righteousness in a land of plenty, of ignorance, of innocence, of evil? Is "you" America, a people not at all ready to be humbled and tested by more Sandys, be they Hooks or Hurricanes?

Hunger has this awesome characteristic: Everyone knows it. Not one of us passes a day without feeling it, or trying to keep from feeling it. Hunger binds us together—or rather, it could. But from fear of hunger, we retreat or recoil into our groups, into our selves, to secure our own satisfactions of endless desires, starving others out if we must. American slavery comprised many evils, but the engine for them all was endless desire for more money and its numberless mouth-watering satisfactions. The whole human predicament can be seen through this lens, how we responded when we hungered from the bottom of our endless desires; for human hunger is not just in the stomach, it is in our soul. That is why the legend of the Fall in the garden of Eden begins with a hunger in the heart of humanity.

When I was twenty, I smoked cigarettes. Lacking the money for a real habit, I smoked seldom and had perhaps more than the average enjoyment from each stick. One evening, as I stood outside alone after dinner, smoking,

I noticed a subtle anxiety accompanying the pleasure of the smoke. It was that this smoke will soon be over and I will have to return to the instants of my life—my choices, my gifts, my uncertainties, my ignorance, my desires, me. I saw that the pleasure of the smoke was not first sensuous or narcotic. The point was my desire just not to feel the question of my life for a little while.

Suddenly, I saw something else. I saw that having sex with my girlfriend was mixed with that same anxiety, for though I wanted her, I only wanted her for a while, not for always. I thought myself atheist then, and not for many years would I learn that when St. Augustine was first drawn to Christ, he had prayed—“*O, Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.*” Nevertheless, as I snuffed the cigarette, my mind was reeling as if at a precipice, about to fall. Is there a bottom of desire? Would I pull anything or anyone over my head to escape for a little the harsh light of of existence’ bare bulb hanging over every hour?

I might not remember this story so well except that a few weeks later, I began taking a course on the theology of Paul Tillich. How astonished and excited I grew, reading Tillich’s discussion of sin. Here’s a morsel.

“Every individual, since he is separated from the whole, desires reunion with the whole. His poverty makes him seek abundance . . . The classical name for this desire is concupiscence—the unlimited desire to draw the whole of reality into one’s self.”
(*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 52)

Let’s be plain. If our separation from the whole drives our desire for reunion, then it is an endless desire in all of us and the singer k.d. laing has it right: “Constant craving is all there is.” It’s not about sex. It’s not about food or alcohol or money. All these objects of desire, and a hundred more besides, become destructive for us exactly at that instant when we use them *because* we can’t stand another instant of our emptiness; of our humbling; of our soul’s hunger for the whole. When we take what is not given, or when we deceive in order to receive what would not be given, then we fall.

When Jesus was tempted by the devil to put an end to endless desire by making bread from stones, he did not fall for it. He said, “Not by bread alone!” The Word means this. If, at the edge of an endless desire for which you can get no satisfaction, though you’ve tried, and you’ve tried—if you take nothing which is not given, then the hard ground of your existence will break open and you will receive God’s word as seed for life. You will not receive just what you want, but what God gives. This is a spiritual law. Think about it under three species: your person, your church, and your people.

Consider us Christians in person. We love to extol the goodness and abundance of God. *God is good! All the time!* This can be a wonderful affirmation of faith, if it does not send our mind after endless desires. But for many, it does. Think how many churchgoers go crazy with the prosperity

gospel of health and wealth, sending their money to Sunday fat cats as if into slot machines. This is not faith, but endless despair. Now come in a bit closer. How often people praise God for fixing some fearful problem they faced. They had a disease, they prayed, God made it gone, God is good. They lost their job, they prayed to Jesus, Jesus jumped on it, they got the job, praise Jesus. To be prayer-happy with God when we get what we want, and to ignore God like an incompetent servant when we get *not* what we want—surely this is paganism, pure and simple. Surely this is superstition.

Why do I say God is not in the business of filling our endless desires? For the sake of every man I have prayed with in his trial and every woman I have wept with in her grief, whose plain wish went down to the dust. We will not teach the absurd doctrine that God is planning out every hurt and every help.

Why do I say this is not God's business? Because reality is an open system. Because Jesus says so: "God sends the rain on the just and on the unjust." Because Jesus prayed, "Take this cup from me, yet, Lord, not my will, but thy will be done." Because if your God is good only when you get what you want, that god is neither God nor good—and you have yet to meet true God. True God, coming into the midst of your awful frailty and need, will break the ground of your endless desire in order to give you—not what you want, not your old life back, not your dream, but—Godself. God will not give you what you want except you receive a new mind fit for the new gift. It is a spiritual law: For those who wait upon the Lord, God comes not with things to meet your endless desire, but in no thing you expected at all.

Consider the Riverside Church. In the beginning was the money, and the money was big. All things came into being through the money and without the money not one thing came into being. Riverside, you have feasted sumptuously for four score years and more. You have tasted the apple and the fat of the lamb, with many servants to do your bidding. But what's that slang word we have for "money"—*bread*? Did we really imagine that a spiritual body could receive *bread* from the Rock in abundance and not be tempted to become a material body, a corporation that thinks it lives by bread alone?

Since the market crash of 2008, a couple hundred people have left the church. Many now are anxious about the church's money and wonder how long we can wander in this desert time. Some hold back their money, waiting to see if the next administration will prove worthy of their generosity. Others demand austerity from the budget. Still others never consider first fruits giving, whereby you set aside a proportion of your abundance every week or month and live trusting to what's left. There is no flow in such hoarding and guarding and withholding. Understand it: you are being tempted. Do you not know that the Lord your God has led you into this wilder-

ness, to humble you and test you . . . by letting you hunger, by feeding you with food you never knew, to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord?

Dear church, let God break in. God gives the gift of generosity to any who ask help to overcome the tempter's power to stir them to endless desires. If you do not yet offer your gift as first fruits, start there. Reckon a proportion for God—5%, 10%, more—and give it away. If you have not offered your church a pledge, pledge. Whatever authority you have in the church, accept that every memory in your mind about the way things should be arises from the pit of endless desire. God will not fill it. For the church who wait upon the Lord, God comes not with things to meet your endless desires, but in no thing you expected at all. You must not live by bread alone.

Consider the people—"we, the people." By my lights, America as a whole is not very strong, spiritually speaking. I think we would not fare well in a desert time, for we have become very dependent on having things. The dizzy dance of consumption seems to have displaced the very idea that God's gift comes as nothing we knew and nothing we wanted. Here's a statistic from Bill McKibben: Between 1990 and 2005, the amount of U.S. retail floor space per person doubled to almost 40 sq. ft. Consumption used to be the name of a disease; now it's the measure of our happiness. Consuming is consuming us. We are eating the apple in the garden, hoping endless desire will keep us from dying. Can we stop consuming so much? Especially, can we stop consuming oil and gas before we burn ourselves off the planet? Can we live on the land in peace, and learn to let go in peace, and learn to die in the Lord?

Listen. Whether the question is to one person, or to an anxious church, or to a whole people numb with desires, it is one and the same: Will we learn that life comes not by bread alone? Will we wait in that still space, empty of every thing we desired, to hear every word that proceeds from the mouth of the God? For this great work of re-creation, God sustains the Church.

Let us close with a word of endless hope from Howard Thurman, taken from his book, *Jesus and the Dispossessed*: "Nothing less than a great daring in the face of overwhelming odds can achieve the inner security in which fear cannot possibly survive." (p. 56) This has been the journey of America's black history. May it become ours altogether.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*