

<i>Date Preached</i>	25-Jul-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	07-Jul-2025
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 12, Yr B

" A large crowd *kept [on] following* him ... "



It was a bit of a depressing drive. A week ago this past Friday, I had finished the summer course I was taking out in Wisconsin, and I was on my way from the seminary, located west of Milwaukee, to Chicago, where I'd catch my flight back to Hartford. At one point, there must have been a back-up on the interstate, because Google Maps re-routed me onto some secondary highway in southern Wisconsin. What had been an idyllic drive of green-treed hills and dells became an endless procession of traffic lights, strip malls, gas stations and, everywhere—*everywhere*—the eye could see: food! Fast food restaurants, convenience stores, pizza places, sandwich shops, coffee shops, doughnut shops, pretzel shops, ice cream shops As I made my way, mile after mile, through this microcosm of twenty-first-century American consumerism, I found myself getting more and more riled up: We've literally bulldozed and paved over millions of acres of prairie and forest just to sell ourselves the identical low-quality, high-calorie meals and treats in every locale from Calais, Maine, to San Diego, California.

I was still mulling over my detour through our Fast Food Nation during my flight home, later that day. And, slowly, it came to me: My lament was not only aesthetic or environmental or even gastronomic. No, I thought to myself, as a people, we've also lost the opportunity that getting hungry when we're far from home affords us: the often memorable ... and sometimes surprising ... meals we have when we're way out of our element and the only place to eat for miles around is a greasy spoon diner ... or a roadside clam shack ... or a five-seat taqueria. We will usually have forgotten the fast-food burger we wolfed down at a rest stop almost before we've thrown away the wrapper it came in. But when we're forced out of our comfort zone ... when the choice of where—and what—to eat is made *for* us ... an epiphany often takes place.

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Just such a food-epiphany occurs in today's Gospel reading. Saint John suggests that the crowds are religious pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, but their journey has taken a sudden and unexpected detour. They've met Jesus, and they have marveled, in wonder, as He's healed one sick person after another. But now they're in a bind. Having followed Jesus far off their planned itinerary, they've already consumed—hours ago—whatever food they'd purchased for the day, and the next town is miles away. But then, when Jesus realizes their plight and, in His compassion, feeds them through the miracle known, traditionally, as the Multiplication, the crowd's amazement turns to allegiance and devotion; perhaps even *belief*. Although it may be possible for a charlatan to trick people into thinking he's a *healer*—through the use of confederates who only pretend to be sick, for example—there can be no denying that Jesus has just turned five loaves of bread and two fish into a satisfying meal for five thousand people, with plenty to spare.

Truly, the crowd concludes, this Man is some sort of divine who has come into this world ... is someone we need to pay attention to and learn more from.*

But what if the crowd *hadn't* allowed itself to get hungry ... and had missed the opportunity to know Jesus that their hunger afforded them? What if, as the sun drew lower in the sky, they'd gotten worried about where their next meal was going to come from and, so, set off to get to the nearest town—with its taverns and inns—before dark? Or what if, out of an abundance of caution, they had carefully packed enough food to anticipate any possibility they might get lost or be waylaid? In either case, they would never have gotten hungry and, thus, would never have supped on the divine grace Jesus so lovingly feeds them, in such great abundance. This holy communion—their 'first communion,' if you will—would never have occurred. In the event, the crowds' hunger becomes their greatest feast.

And do we not face precisely this risk in our highly commodified culture so fixated on satisfying our every appetite as soon as ... or sometime even before ... we feel hungry? This mindset ... more than anything else ... is, I think, the chief opponent of the 'mainline' Christian tradition in America today. The 'gospel' of today's culture is that inner hunger—what we'd call authentic spiritual longing—is passé ... is obsolete.

- If some aspect of your life isn't satisfying your appetites, *right now* ... whether it's a pastime or a job or even a relationship ... don't just hang around, expecting anything to materialize or evolve. No, prayer and patience are for suckers! Move on! Try the *next* thing; it's sure to have just what you want to feed your soul. Until it doesn't.
- Or, alternatively, pack your life with so much stuff—media, possessions, activities, wealth—that you can't possibly ever grow hungry. And so, we lay in enough distraction and diversion to feed a small army ... but fail to realize how little nutrition all this spiritual 'junk food' actually provides our souls.

In the words of today's collect, this is to pass through the things that are temporal in a way that threatens to lose the things that are eternal.

As Christians, it's our calling to learn, over time, the *true* metabolics of faith: Our inner, spiritual hunger isn't an *appetite*, for us to satisfy with the meager fare this world has to offer ... but an *opportunity* to seek Jesus and let *Him* feed us. Our inner hunger leads us to a soup kitchen in Torrington ... and He feeds us in every person to whom we offer a meal. Our spiritual pangs lead us to a Bible study or a prayer group or to volunteering at a Tag Sale ... and He feeds us in every new insight and moment of fellowship. And each week, we wake up on Sunday morning hungry for the Truth and Goodness and Beauty that *nothing* in the previous six days of our lives has even come close to offering us ... and He feeds us in the liturgy of His Word and His Body, as surely and lovingly as a mother feeds her infant child.

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* In fairness to the text, I don't want to make *too* much of this. While the people recognize something extraordinary (*i.e.*, extra-worldly) in Jesus, their response is not so much one of faith as of fealty. They want to crown Him their king—want to reflect in His glory—rather than become His disciples. Still and all, their hunger provides another opportunity, in John's particular telling of the Good News, to reveal Jesus as ὁ Λόγος: the Word of God.

It's difficult to regard hunger as a 'good,' I know. Our bodies warn us against its physical presence, and our culture manipulates and encourages us to keep its spiritual manifestation securely at bay: to keep eating as if we could ever fill our own selves. But Our Savior, as always, has a very different message for us: *Heed* that hunger ... seek Me in it ... let Me feed you ... and I will satisfy you with the Bread of Life, forever.



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