

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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BIG FEELINGS:
Loneliness
Dr. Jo Forrest

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You may remember the TV commercial in which the late Betty White appears in a park with a bunch of young men playing football. Until her death a few years ago at just shy of 100 years, Betty White's candor to name what we all might think or feel made her a comedy legend. She gave us belly laughs by never mincing words when she described her desires. Often sensual desires. Even as she aged.

In this commercial, Betty White hunkers-down on the offensive line with these young men and totally botches the play, risking the game with yet another fumble. Someone on the sidelines sees her as not a frail old lady but instead as someone feeble by hunger.

They hand her a Snicker's bar, and Betty White suddenly morphs into a burly athlete. The thirty second clip closes with the tag line, "you're not you if you're hungry."

You know the kind of hungry.

Being hungry leads to being *hangry* with all of *hangry's* repercussions.

Your body craves fuel so much that the grumbling in your belly almost fades as you start to act erratically, irrational, or irritated...and the list goes on of ways hunger drives desperate acts. Our bodies need sustenance from the world around to exist from one day to the next. We feel this. It's basic biology to hunger and thirst.

And God created us to be more than just fleshy beasts. God created us to thrive in a community with one another, to need one another. We also crave a purpose, to know our origin, and seek our ultimate end.

How did we go from snacking on a Snicker's bar to an existential crisis?

Big feelings could drive us in myriad different directions and some with weighty consequences. On the one hand, maybe all we need is a temporary sugar fix. Or, maybe the way we are living is starving us.

Over the next several weeks, we'll talk about the big feelings we experience. Some of these feelings we tend to shove under the rug as impolite, or beneath us, or make us uncomfortable to mention. Such as anger, sorrow, joy in the

midst of suffering, despair, envy, fear, and that all too common one of anxiety. What makes these feelings so challenging is that they rarely exist in isolation. Usually, they swirl in a cocktail of complexity.

Scripture teems with stories of people just like us who feel deeply and whose needs God satisfies.

Today's lesson comes right on cue from the lectionary. Jesus just fed the crowd of the 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes. As reward for and to encourage for more and more such gifts, the crowd tries to crown Jesus as king. That's when he withdraws.

People just don't seem to understand who he is and how he can satisfy all their needs.

Dear God,

We come to you with all our desires.

Some we can name and some that burn deeply within.

*Help us understand and help us trust you
with these lives you've given us.*

Tune out all the noise that might distract us.

Send your spirit among us so that we

hear your son's voice speak the words of life.

God, satisfy us with your eternal word. Amen.

John 6:24-35

²⁴ So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God has set his seal."

²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must *we do to perform* the works of God?"

²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you *believe in him* whom he has sent."

³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What *work are you performing?* ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ”

³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

You may have heard it as well. Jesus seems irritated at how obtuse they were. It happens throughout his ministry.

When Jesus encounters a lone woman at the well, someone ostracized from polite company, he offers her *living water*. At first, she’s confused. She imagines some plumbing project to

quench her thirst rather than the life-giving relationship which he offers, *and she desperately needs.*

In John's gospel, Jesus readily ministers to those whom he encounters without any litmus test of faith ahead of time. After he tends someone's need, he asks them to believe. And so often they just don't seem to get it. Whether it's an illness or disability or hunger, most people settle for instant gratification without considering the divine source.

The crowd that feasted on the miracle of abundant bread and fish seem blind to the gift of being in relationship with him, of knowing him and being known by him.

They were willing to settle for a political ruler and tried to make him king. When he withdraws, they "come looking" for Jesus to perform another trick.

That's when Jesus challenges their motives. They are preoccupied with the wrong stuff. They seem more interested in their stomachs than their souls.

No wonder Jesus hints at feeling irritated. Jesus irritated? Yes, just like we know Jesus grieves, weeps, gets angry, and

expresses the full gamut of feelings with also joy and gratitude. He knows what it is to feel deeply in this fleshy body.

Jesus begins by feeding the crowd simple fish sandwiches because he knows that they are hungry. Of course they're hungry for literal bread; they're poor, food is scarce. There's nothing wrong, substandard, or "unspiritual" about their physical hunger. Jesus tends to their bodies first.

It is later, when they look for him to fix their other world desires Jesus names their misguided pursuit. He'll not reign as a king in the courts or marketplace. He is the savior of our lives. That gnawing in their guts is also a hunger for a life that gives them life and not just a quick fix.

What are those hungers? A hunger for security and belonging? Meaning and purpose? A longing for connection, communion, intimacy, and love? A desire to know and be known? These are the feelings caught up in loneliness.

Loneliness may rise from a longing to share in the joys of life, or an unrealized passion to strive for a goal that is beyond your capacity. You want to be a part of a team, and no one

joins you. Or maybe loneliness is a byproduct of feeling vulnerable. At the risk of being hurt again, you isolate yourself. It might seem safer to be alone.

Then we really become vulnerable since culture feeds us images of the self-made person who never seems to want for anything, particularly companionship. So, add a bit of envy to that emptiness and you've got a toxic brew.

Loneliness can give way to fear and lead to judgement or cruelty. We let fear of being wrong, or rejected, or belittled alienate us from the most likely antidote to our loneliness – another person.

Loneliness is becoming a health epidemic, leading to illness across all ages, incomes, and demographics. In our hyper-connectedness we have fewer confidences. Some people do not even share their deepest longings with a spouse.

The gospel story invites us to realize that any grumbling in our belly might be for more than just food. These feeling nags us until we satisfy our longings for what and who makes for a life of meaning, purpose and faith.

St Augustine wrote, allow me to paraphrase, “God has made us for God’s own self and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.”

Loneliness may be the opening for us to seek after God. Longing for a life that matters is the insatiable appetite only God can meet.

Maybe that’s how he got the attention of the crowd, Jesus speaks about a different kind of food, a food endures.

They ask, how do we get that food, Jesus? *What must we do* for the bread that truly satisfies? *What must we do?* Mercifully. It’s not about doing something more. Rather, it’s about receiving him. Just open yourself to his gift.

“This is the work of God,” he says, “That you *believe* in the one whom God has sent”. This is how we get the food that endures – we *believe* in him, *believe*, and then become a part of the community he builds.

The miracle cure to our loneliness as individuals and the healing of our community begins at his table. We bring our broken selves, the shame and guilt, the ways we failed to love

others, the weariness. He takes all of us and renews us with grace. He welcomes a broken community to the table, people who rarely speak, let alone sit together, and he makes us whole.

It's just a piece of bread and a taste of the vine. It seems meager. I imagine none of us are here looking for our daily bread. We too crave a relationship with God.

Our hunger becomes a holy hunger when it brings us towards him who gives purpose and meaning to life. Our hunger keeps us faithful through the hard times and going the distance. Our hunger does not lead to a lonely meal but a banquet with others.

Two thousand years ago, those crowds did not understand. Somewhere around 5,000 ate with him at the side of the sea, but only a few who feasted were present as he hung on the cross.

But afterward, they understood. They believed him. They became his body in the world to teach us to love one another and live across all the divides.



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