Hunger

March 31st, 2019

4th Sunday of Lent

It is the 1880s, and a hungry young man is wandering the streets of Kristiana, or Oslo, in search of employment, food, a place to sleep, and companionship. At times, he receives the kindness and hospitality of strangers, but often he squanders what he has on other poor people, or flakes out and fails to make things work. It is almost as if he clings to his physical and spiritual hunger, a prodigal son without a father to return to, or at least an unwillingness to return. Our poor, hungry vagrant is the main character of the novel *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun, a chilling portrait of the modern human condition. The far country is his own hometown, and it is only in leaving home that he can find some sort of liberation from his hunger, which preys upon his mental and spiritual health. At one point, he says to himself: “What sense could there possibly be to have absolutely all one’s most sincere and diligent endeavors come to nothing?...Here I was walking around so hungry that my intestines were squirming inside me like snakes, and I had no guarantee there would be something in the way of food later in the day either. And as time went on I was getting more and more hollowed out, spiritually and physically, and I stooped to less and less honorable actions every day. I lied without blushing to get my way, cheated poor people out of their rent, even had to fight off the thought, mean as it could be, of laying hands on other people’s blankets, all without remorse, without a bad conscience. Rotten patches were beginning to appear in my inner being, black spongy growths that were spreading more and more. And God sat up in his heaven keeping a watchful eye on me, making sure that my destruction took place according to all the rules of the game, slowly and steadily, with no letup” (Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*. Tr. Sverre Lyngstad*.* London: Penguin Books, 1998. 45). The more bleak things become, the more he seems to push away God, hope and real opportunities, even making a point of lying to himself: “A cart rolled slowly by. I see there are potatoes in the cart, but out of rage, from sheer obstinacy, I take it into my head to say they weren’t potatoes at all, they were cabbages, and I swore horribly that they were cabbages. I heard quite well what I said, and I swore willfully time after time, upholding this lie just to have the droll satisfaction of committing downright perjury. Drunk with this unprecedented sin, I raised three fingers and swore with quivering lips in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost that they were cabbages. Time passed. I let myself sink down on the steps near me and wiped the sweat off my forehead and my neck, and took a deep breath and forced myself to be calm. The sun was going down, the afternoon was wearing on. I began once more to brood on my situation. My hunger was getting outrageous, and in a few hours it would be night again…” (Hamsun, 188). The poor man cannot come to his senses and remains an alienated exile in an imaginary war with God, the city and his hunger.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son has had many interpretations, some of them more structured and sound than others. I would like to venture a simple, fairly relevant one that only requires imagining yourself inside the parable. Whether you are the older brother or the younger brother—what kind of father would you prefer to have? To his returned, sinful son, the father is a fountain of joy: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20); “The father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet...for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:22-24). To his grudging, outwardly upright older son, he is likewise generous: “His father came out and began to plead with him…Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’” (Luke 15:28, 31-32). Though we can imagine all kinds of back story and rewrite Norman MacLean’s *A River Runs Through It* or punk band Social Distortion’s song “I Was Wrong”*,* the parable gives us very little back story. While it may seem cliché, it is difficult not to see the younger brother as penitent, the older brother as unforgiving, and the father as ridiculously merciful and loving. And this is a fairly good portrait of humanity today—the broken that seek mending, the broken that hide their cracks, and the loving God who would heal all and give everything for the redemption of humanity. It is a picture of three different spiritual stances—seeking God, rejecting God, and God bestowing mercy.

At the heart of this parable is hunger. The younger son discovers how lost he is when he experiences real physical hunger: “When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’” (Luke 15:14-17). Similarly, the older brother mentions food when he refuses to go back home: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”” (Luke 15:29-30). Indeed, the father’s welcoming gesture to the younger son is prepare a feast immediately: “And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:23-24). It was fairly normal in my household growing up that when reconciling after a major squabble, my parents would brew coffee and feed us coffee cake or some other treat. It is healing to eat together and to give thanks together that we have so much. It is not the food itself that is nourishing but the relationship we share. There is no experience in life that can compare with experiencing love. I have had some fairly strange and interesting experiences in my life, but I would trade them all in a heartbeat if it meant keeping those moments of being together with loved ones. I imagine most of us would rather be poor and have our families and friends than be wealthy and alone—tempting as the thought might be on some days.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father, like God, provides food. The younger son wanted to get away from that provision, but learned that he could not live without it. The older brother never took advantage of his father’s generosity. This is about faith. The younger son had faith that his father would at least let him back into the estate as a slave; the older son never had the faith to ask the father for anything. There are some who leave the kingdom thinking they will find a better kingdom elsewhere. There are some who seem to live in the kingdom without ever experiencing the kingdom or really knowing the King. Both are very spiritually hungry. Jesus himself described faith as a type of food: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (John 4:34); “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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 the Father has set his seal.’” (John 6:26-27). It is tempting to search for other kingdoms; it is tempting to hang out in the Kingdom without really being subject to the King. Our parable today suggests that both stances are an emptiness, a hunger. To have faith is to return to our spiritual food security. To come to our senses, to seek the God who gives mercy, and to receive the joy of the Heavenly Father. For God is gracious. Every day we are prodigal; every day we need to come home to God the Father. In commenting on the Lord’s Prayer, the early Christian John Cassian speaks of this daily need: “*Give us this day our daily bread.* Where it says ‘daily’ it shows that without it we cannot live a spiritual life for a single day. Where it says ‘this day’ it shows that it must be received daily and that yesterday’s supply of it is not enough. It must be given to us today also in the same manner. And our daily need of it suggests to us that we ought at all times to offer up this prayer, because there is no day on which we have no need to strengthen the heart of our inner person by eating and receiving it” (John Cassian. *Writings of John Cassian.* Ed. Keith Beasley-Topliffe. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 54). There is a banquet of heavenly bread awaiting us every day if we are only willing to return home, to the Kingdom and its King, to the grace of being children loved ever so much by our God and Father who desires all to find peace.