

TEXT: Isaiah 55:1-3; Matthew 14:13-21  
THEME: Listen so that you may live  
SUBJECT: Satisfaction  
TITLE: "This Sweet Hurt"

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Swedish chef Magnus Nilsson created a destination restaurant named Fäviken. 370 miles north of Stockholm, in the middle of nowhere, twenty-four people lucky enough to have reservations enjoy a 30 course tasting menu over two and a half hours. Reservations open on April 1 and within a few hours the restaurant is booked for the year.

Chef Nilsson described his reason for doing a tasting menu: "You know how the first bite is the best bite. If you like the first bite you savor the second and third bites. But after the third bite the returns diminish. So. Why not enjoy thirty courses of one, two or three bites?"

Nilsson knows something about satisfaction. He woke up one morning, his restaurant listed in the top 25 restaurants in the world, and knew he didn't want to go to work anymore. At 35 years old, he closed Fäviken in December 2019. He bought an apple orchard in the south of Sweden not knowing how he was going to make a living.

Over 2,700 hundred years ago, Isaiah asked a question as contemporary as the summer heat: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, come to me; listen, so that you may live."

Isaiah is not offering a Michelin Guide review to a three star restaurant. "Bread" and "rich food" are metaphors for God's steadfast love. Isaiah is assuring the people of God's everlasting covenant with them. The prophet implores the people "to listen" to him rather than to the voices of despair so that they may live.

The story of the unnamed Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at noon at a well echoes Isaiah's message. The well water, which must be drawn daily, becomes a metaphor for water that satisfies your thirst for life. The woman exclaimed to her neighbors, "Come and see the man who told me all the things I have done." She is fully and completely known and fully and completely loved.

The gospel reading for today tells the story of the feeding of five thousand men plus women and children with five loaves of bread and two fish, a story told in all four Gospels. We may choose to believe in a miraculous multiplication of food and sing the old hymn, "Little is much when God is in it!" Satisfying physical hunger is a good work worthy of us all, but I don't know anyone who can feed five thousand plus people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

This feeding comes at the end of a long day of teaching. A large crowd was listening to Jesus when he heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, was beheaded by Herod. Jesus got in a boat to escape the crowd, to grieve alone with the disciples.

Somehow the crowd followed Jesus “on foot.” The crowd was so hungry to hear Jesus’ teaching, it refused to let him grieve alone. When Jesus disembarked, the crowd was waiting. What if the five loaves of bread and two fish that satisfy the hunger of the crowd is Jesus’ interpretation of the five books of Moses and the two covenants?

Why do we spend our money for that which is not bread, for that which does not sustain life? Why do we labor for that which does not satisfy, for that which does not fulfill us?

James Laughlin was a poet, publisher, world-class skier, the man behind some of the most daring, revolutionary works in verse and prose of the twentieth century. Near the end of his life, hit hard by the death of close friends, he yearned to escape.

He and his wife Ann decided on a winter trip to the Alps. They travelled to Zell am See, not far from Grossglockner in the Kitzbühel Alps, one of James’ favorite places a half century earlier. Here at the site of so many youthful adventures and dreams of literary accomplishment, he wondered if he had done the right thing with his life.

James pondered the inadvisability of returning to places of happiness, the inn at Zermatt, the Due Torri restaurant in Verona. By any measure *but his own* he had accomplished a lot; he had so much to find joy in. But had his adventures and travels brought him real knowledge? Had his marriages or his liaisons given him lasting happiness? He wondered whether perhaps the discontent was simply an expression of the human condition.

James copied out the words of Flaubert: “Without the Concept of Happiness existence would be more bearable.” Would it? Would life be more bearable if we didn’t know desires satisfied by our “ten thousand days of work?” (Wendell Berry) Owen Merton, Thomas Merton’s father, declared, “Painting is the only thing I want to do. . . .it takes all I have—and satisfies me—and I have no time think of anything else.”

St Augustine is one of the greatest theologians of desire. He was inspired by the Psalms. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:1-2). “Seek ye God, and your soul shall live” (Ps 69:32). Augustine believed God must be sought because God is hidden. When one finds God, God must still be sought in order to be found because of God’s immensity.

God satisfies the seeker in the measure of the seeker’s capacity, and God makes the finder to have greater capacity so that she may again seek to be filled when her ability to receive has grown. Finding the beloved does not put an end to the love-inspired search; but as love grows, so the search for the one already found becomes more intense.

Because of the immensity of God, who is endlessly rich in love and wisdom, our desire too can be endless. Why not give up on comprehending what is incomprehensible? Because we become better and better by looking for a greater good, a good which is both sought in order to be found all the more delightfully and found in order to be sought all the more avidly.

Our desire is a response to being attracted, desired, and loved by God. Even, the saints assure us, when we no longer see through a glass darkly but face to face, the capacity for fulfillment will be enlarged each time we are satisfied, for there is no end to the love of God.

PRAYER: St Gregory (c.335-395) of Nyssa (southeastern Turkey) Bishop whose writings helped to shape Orthodox (Eastern Christian) theology and spirituality.

“Soul’s Eternal Repose” translation by Scott Cairns

The soul that looks  
    finally to God, conceives  
        a new, mouth-watering  
desire for His  
    eternal beauty,  
        and tasting this, she  
awakens to an ever  
    greater yearning—  
        an ache never  
to be fully satisfied.

By this sweet hurt,  
    she never ceases  
        to extend herself,  
to touch those things  
    beyond her reach  
        and ever beckoning.

By this she finds herself  
    passing, always,  
        from her present  
circumstances to enter  
    more deeply the interior,  
        and to find  
there yet another  
    circumstance awaiting.

And thus, at every point  
    she learns that each  
        new splendor is to be  
eclipsed by what will come—  
    the ever-exceeding  
        Beautiful that draws, and calls,  
and leads the beloved  
    to a beauty of her own.