

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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During my last year of seminary, I worked part-time for about nine months in the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. If you don't know, the Merchandise Mart was at the time, and maybe it still is, the largest furniture and home goods showroom space in the world. It takes up several city blocks right on the Chicago River. It's an imposing edifice of luxury sinks, sofas, lamps, bookcases—anything you can imagine that a home might need, you can find it in the Merchandise Mart.

I worked on the 18th floor and mostly did two things: I answered phones, and I checked purchase orders. Almost everything we sold was custom built to the client's specifications, so there were lots of details requiring attention. I made sure that the orders were perfectly correct in each step of the process. If the buyer specified a 72-inch long table, and the builder built a 70-inch long table, that's a pretty expensive mistake. Checking everything about twenty times for accuracy was the name of the game.

I did not enjoy that job. I thought the furniture was generally dowdy and overpriced, and I found most of the clients tedious. Still, I needed the job, and so I did my best with as little eye rolling as possible.

I remember one client particularly well. She had come in several times to look at floor models of enormous, imposing dining room tables. These were absolute works of art—heavy, wonderfully carved, and inviting. She selected one of the large tables, requested some custom dimensions, and then paid extra for a rush job so that it would be back to her house by Thanksgiving.

The twelve weeks between her order and Thanksgiving were awful. Every third day, I would get a call either from the buyer or from the designer asking me for an update or making some last minute change to the order. The woman was filled with anxiety, and it presented itself as old-fashioned nastiness. Talking to her on the phone was an exercise in Christian virtue, and it took everything I had not to give her a piece of my mind and then, likely, get fired.

As Thanksgiving approached, it was a bit of a toss-up whether her table would be ready in time. The calls increased in frequency. We all knew her name and her number and drew straws for who would have to talk to her on a given day.

One afternoon, I had this funny thought. I started to wonder what kind of Thanksgiving she was expecting. Were her young adult children glad to come home? Would they notice all the time and effort she put into the table? Was there some rift in the family that made this table so important? The buyer came off as both mean and desperate.

What I knew at the tender age of 25, and what you know listening to this story, is that this woman's anxiety wasn't really about the table. There was something deeper going on for her. I'll

never know the whole story, but I'd bet a year's pay that she was hungry for something. Starving even. And it had nothing to do with a table that cost more than my car.

The table lady is an extreme example of someone hungry for something. I didn't have a lot of compassion for her when I was younger, but thinking back, I kind of ache for whatever hunger she was trying to address. I know that I have a hunger inside me. I imagine you have one inside you. It's the human condition. It's a little bit of restlessness deep in the gut. Humans are genius at finding ways to tame the hunger—shopping, substances, sex, food. The problem, of course, is that we are not hungry for those things. They aren't real.

We are hungry for God. We are hungry to be known by God. We are hungry to be loved by God. In St. Augustine's Confessions, he writes to God, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." I have that posted on the wall of my office because I think that sums up the human condition rather beautifully.

There's a reason that Jesus spends so much time talking about himself as the bread of life. He calls himself the bread of life four times in one chapter. He is not being subtle or coy about this message, and I think we ought to pay attention. Jesus is telling anyone who will listen that he can feed the hunger that sits so deep inside their souls. He is the real food. He is the real antidote to restlessness that's part of living on this fragile planet.

And the church is wise to put these bread passages over and over again in our Gospel stories this summer. The church thinks that pointing us to Jesus the bread we so sorely crave is important enough to mention it for several weeks in a row. Perhaps this repetition will help the message sink in a bit.

What are you hungry for, my friends? What is our community hungry for? Maybe it is justice for the whole world. Maybe it's compassion and vulnerability in our relationships with one another. Maybe this church is hungry for the Holy Spirit to fill our rooms with courage and vibrancy. I don't know what the specific hungers are in your life. I have a few hunches about what the hungers are in our church, but even then it's just my best guess.

Listen to your belly this week. Maybe there is a restless sense in the pit of your stomach that you are trying to fill in a way that isn't very good for you or your family. Or maybe you are so busy, you haven't had a chance to really take stock of your own hunger. But I've never met anyone who wasn't hungry. And I've never met anyone who wasn't hungry for God.

There's no table big enough, lovely enough, costly enough, or timely enough that can ever take the place of the Lord's Table and the bread broken for everyone here each Sunday. God is going to feed you with Godself, and you will not be hungry. That's Jesus' promise to the disciples, and it's Jesus' promise to us this morning. God is closer to us than bread in our belly. You may rely on that. Go, and hunger no more. Amen.