



Are You Hungry?

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2015
Chris

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor

There are few moments as satisfying or as intense as standing on the floor of a stadium overlooking 30,000 people. On Wednesday, July 15th at 5:30pm the doors to Ford Field opened and we began to welcome the students, youth directors, bishops, and pastors to the youth gathering. 2 years of planning, 16 teams of volunteers, conference calls with more people than one can count, negotiations with 115 hotel properties, 2 bus companies, the city of Detroit, the convention center, Ford Field, our national church offices, and contracts – contracts – contracts – more than I can count or remember. All leading up to the moment we began the opening night's event. Imagine praise music – way too loud – flashing lights on several levels – LED screens 40 feet high and a cross rising 110 feet into the air. I truly believe there is nothing like it anywhere else in the Church (big C) around the world. There are larger gatherings of course. There are churches in the world that gather more than 30,000 in one worship service on a Sunday.

And yet, this one event of our church gives me hope for the world where high school students are concerned. For one week they let go of their need to be cool and accepted for all the other reasons besides the truth of their identity as children of God. I often wonder what our church would look like if we offered the same event focused on college aid students – you know the ones leaving the church faster than everyone else. For that matter, I wonder, what would the church look like if we offered the same event for adults – 22 and older. And then my cynicism kicks in – who would come? High school students may have the choice but they are always up for the adventure...college students are also up for the adventure – they just tend to be broke...and well adults – vacation sounds a lot better than a church gathering. And so I am content with a youth gathering once every three years. Like having a new baby and wanting to get out of diapers before the next child is born - I need to forget how much work it is to bring a youth gathering to life – it takes about a year to forget enough that when the national church comes calling I am ready – or better yet – my wife is ready to say yes again to the extra time and commitment. Regardless, please hear a deep and passionate thank you for your willingness to share my skills with the larger church. They are grateful to you and so am I.

6:24 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. 6:25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 6:26 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

We are hungry. Hungry for more than we have and more than we ever need. Jesus knows all about the hunger of God's people. He stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee as the people crowded around him and asked him to quell their hunger. The crowd had found the answer to their problems. The feeding of the five thousand had just taken place and this crowd who had now followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee figures they have hit pay-dirt. They found the gravy-train that is Jesus Christ and they are not about to let him get away. Well if Jesus could feed five thousand of us with just a few loaves and fish then he could feed us all the time. We would no longer have to work to buy food to feed our families. They think to themselves. And if we don't have to work for food, maybe Jesus would also provide us with shelter so we do not have to worry about upkeep on our homes. And you know if Jesus is providing shelter maybe he could send me a on a little vacation to Jerusalem. It has been s o long since I have seen my relatives. And the list goes on and on and on.

We are hungry. It is the reason some of us are here this morning. I am hungry for all that the world promises and never delivers. Comfort. Security. Possessions. Acceptance. Community. I want it all and the world tells me again and again – do this and you will get this. Promise. Except the world loves to break its promises. Like watching the rise of one more celebrity to the very top of stardom – the world hungers – the world waits in expectation - for the fall. And the people who follow Jesus this day – they are no different. Sure, we will follow this Jesus – until he disappoints. Until he can't deliver. Until he winds up dead.

And Jesus responds, "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," says Jesus. And immediately the people are wondering what exactly Jesus means by work. I already donate food to the food bank thinks one person; and another says to his neighbor do you think being on the Church Council is enough; a third is over heard saying I did sign up to drive for a junior high school event last year; and one more in the back wondered if singing in the choir/praise band was enough. Maybe that was enough. And then in true Savior fashion, Jesus turns their whole world upside down once again with the explanation of what Jesus means by work. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent."



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Tell me please – how much exactly is enough? I want to know. It seems in my own life a few too many prayers have gone unanswered. I have walked with far too many brothers and sisters, faithful and believing brothers and sisters, who have still found their faces wet with tears as they buried love ones. I have seen the rejection of a parent by a child. I have seen marriages crumble. And I have watched the last shallow breath of a husband, father, uncle, brother, friend leave the body while their hand was still being held so tightly that both sets of knuckles turned white. How much faith exactly? And then we hear these words again...“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” Oh my friends, that is far too easy. And that may be the greatest of the world's broken promises to each of us – that a relationship with God – our relationship with God - is about what we do to come to God. And then we hear these words...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.” So my friends, the question is this...are you hungry? I hope so. It's time to eat. And here at God's table – all are welcome. But before we eat...let me offer one more thing...

Two days after the Youth Gathering, a reporter wrote an article for the Huffington post ...Visualize 30,000 young people singing worship songs, dancing in the aisles, and praising Jesus. Might sound like something from an Evangelical or Pentecostal church. Yet these youth filling Detroit's Ford Field were not from a charismatic tradition, but from a denomination more known for pipe organs, vestments, and hot dish casseroles filled with tater tots: the Lutherans.

Wearing bright neon shirts representing every color of the rainbow, these youth came together this past week for the triennial [ELCA National Youth Gathering](#). With them they brought a wave of hopefulness too strong to avoid. As a volunteer at the event, I couldn't seem to go anywhere without encountering this zeal. Every walk through downtown or along Detroit's riverfront greeted me with a multitude of teenagers raising their hands for a high-five or cheering in elation. Even beyond the event's participants, local residents expressed a similar jubilee: "Thank you for coming to Detroit!" passersby would smile and shout on the streets outside the General Motors Renaissance Center.

"We are so happy you're here sharing Jesus!" waiters would smile as we entered Greektown's popular restaurants. And from downtown's convention center to suburban hotels, employees, cops and panhandlers would raise their hand in the air, catching the infectious high-five trend, and say, "You are bringing so much joy to this city!" For a faith rooted in sharing the Gospel (meaning "good news"), I can think of no better manifestation than the week of constant optimism that radiated through this city. Whether it was mobs of teenagers singing "Make A Difference" through the streets, or one high-schooler cleaning up a blighted neighborhood, I saw it infect every person that encountered a Gathering participant. As I witnessed this enthusiasm, I was overcome with a pride for the universal church that I, unfortunately, haven't recently felt. In fact, the last time my eyes welled up with this bliss was while working at a church camp. As I examined the differences between normal life and what I experienced at both the camp and this Gathering, I found one key difference: Positivity.

Outside these exceptions, American Christianity seems to have been hijacked by negativity. A quick search of recent news proves this, as a faith meant to be characterized by its "good news" has become known not by what it's *for*, but by what it's against. Christians in America are now best recognized by their [feigned religious persecution](#), [anti-Muslim sentiments](#), or their [unwillingness to bake a cake](#) for a same-sex wedding. Such actions bring to mind the words of one of my mentors, a resident of America's Bible Belt, who often says, "I'm for any religion that doesn't hurt people." Why has American Christianity become known for the pain it causes? To paraphrase a delegate at a recent church convention that hotly debated the allowance of openly LGBT pastors, "Why isn't our church this passionate about poverty?"

Why aren't we known as the faith that seeks to feed the hungry, shelter the needy, and comfort the sick? Why aren't we investing our resources in activities that cause people to say, "You are bringing so much joy!"? Let American Christianity stop being known as a religion that hurts, as a faith focused on what we're against, and instead let them know we are Christians by our love. By the same love that radiated from 30,000 youth in Detroit. Instead of us teaching the children how to act as the church, maybe we need to let them lead the way. Let them guide America away from a church hijacked by negativity to a place where we are known by our Gospel. By our good news.



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