

“That Mysterious Hunger”

**Baccalaureate Sermon
Wabash College
The Rev. John Ohmer
Rector, St. James’ Episcopal Church, Leesburg Virginia
May 13, 2007**

First, a word of thanks to President White for the honor of being asked to preach in this chapel, and on this joyful occasion. This is the second time I have stood in this pulpit and preached, the first time being a few years ago at my reunion weekend. It is always an honor to be invited to preach somewhere, but it is even more of an honor to be *invited back*.

Second, to you seniors: let me add my voice to those many voices congratulating you seniors on your graduation. Perhaps, for some of you, all the “congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!” sound a bit funny to you, like, “what’s the big deal?” because you take your graduation for granted...you always knew you’d graduate, it was just a matter of time and now-the-day-has-arrived-and-it’s-not-that-big-a-deal.

Uh...not so for me when I was in your place.

At *no point* did I take my graduation from here for granted. Certainly not the week before, when I and three other graduating seniors found ourselves being overnight guests at the Montgomery County Jail.

I’d like to be able to say that we were in jail as a result of having been arrested, on principle, while staging some sort of peaceful protest in a worthy cause, like some sort of modern-day Martin Luther King Jr’s...

...but the truth of the matter is, we were there because the night before, after doing a good bit of celebrating, about 1:00 in the morning, we decided to go to New Orleans – which is a bad decision in and of itself, but becomes a spectacularly bad decision when you decide the way you are going to get there is by canoe –
(that would be Sugar Creek to the Wabash to the Ohio to the Mississippi right on along the state lines of Kentucky-Arkansas-Mississippi and then into Louisiana getting us to New Orleans we figured by daybreak.)

Well, we only managed to make oh, about three hundred yards of the journey, when we ran into some representatives from the Crawfordsville Police Department who did not share our sense of excitement over this journey, and who had different ideas about how and where we should be spending the night.

When it got to the point where we allowed our one phone call, we all decided that that call would be to Dean Moore, and my three friends decided *I* would get to be the one to get to call him.

I don't know if you've heard any stories about Dean Moore, but let me tell you, he wasn't the sort of person you wanted to call at 2:30 a.m.

(The way he answered the phone was "DIS-BEDDER-BE-GOOD." (Uh...no...it's not. Uh...we've been arrested and need someone to help us.))

"Who's 'we?!?'"

I hesitated. Of the four of us, two were Lilly Scholars, three of us (well, three of them) were graduating with honors. One was a graduation speaker. I told him the names. Dean Moore said, "oh sh---the *cream of the crop!*"

(Under the circumstances, you're really not sure whether to take that as a compliment or not...)

(I decided to be quiet, which was a good thing, because the one thing Dean Moore required of all four of us, as a condition of helping us, was that we were to keep, to say the very least, a very low profile between that night and graduation day – he said that if he heard our names even *mentioned*, he'd make sure we wouldn't be sitting where you are now sitting. So, we kept a low profile and right up until the moment we crossed the stage and were handed our sheepskins, we did not take our graduation for granted.)

But even prior to that, I did not take my graduation for granted, for academic reasons. Let's just say that if the grading scale is like a piano, then I was not one to just play one or two notes; I played the *whole scale*, all the way up and all the way down.

My very first paper, freshman year, during freshman tutorial, I got it back with an "F" at the top, and below the "F" was the comment, "John, this is not a paper but a collection of loosely related quotes, most of them clichés."

(I was fairly certain that that was not a compliment).

- Another year – I think it was my Sophomore year – I took a course in Classics from John Fisher – seniors, you may remember him from your Freshman year – and I had turned in to him an *awful* research paper. I knew it was awful.

Well, a few days later, instead of just getting it back, I got a phone call from Professor Fisher, asking me to come to his office. When I got there, he was sitting there behind his desk and after I sat down, he held up my paper (like a dirty diaper), and handed it to me, saying something to the effect of,

“John, to put a grade on.....this...even an “F,” would be to acknowledge it as a research paper. Which I refuse to do.”

(I was certain that that was not a compliment -- you *know* a paper is bad when it doesn't even rise to the level of an “F.”)

But you know, I was wrong! –

In an odd kind of way, it *was* a compliment.

He was saying -- as so many professors before and after him said --

“John, you're better than this.”

Which is another way of saying, “*I believe in you.*”

I believe you can do better.”

In a world that –

on the one hand either

settles for less – pretending that higher values, higher standards – ideals – do not exist –

or on the other hand:

is merciless – hammering us or shaming us when we fall short

Wabash professors strike an artful balance – saying, in effect,

“this is unacceptable...It is unacceptable because

you can do better than this

--because **YOU** are better than this.

I hear in those professors' voices a paternal (and also maternal) concern

Yet one that is not paternalistic

And so I hear in those voices the echo of another Voice...

a paternal/maternal Voice that asks us

“why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?

Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy?

To a people that tend to believe God

either **settles for less** – pretending that higher values, higher standards – ideals – do not exist –

or on the other hand:

is merciless – hammering us or shaming us when we fall short

God's voice calls out and offers an alternative, a life-giving alternative:

“Listen, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ... Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. ...

This question – **why do you labor for that which does not satisfy**

and this invitation – **come and eat what is good,**

Was addressed originally to the people Israel, captive in Babylon,

But it is the same question and same invitation that comes to us gathered here this morning, captive to so many things:

Why do you settle for less?

“why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?

Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy?

There is a mysterious hunger inside each of us... a seemingly unquenchable thirst, a deep desire, a *yearning*...an emptiness that only God can fill.

St. Augustine said it best when he said, “you have created us for yourself, dear Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

In other words, there's a God-shaped hole in each of us that only God can fill.

But we spend so much time trying to fill that god-shaped hole with all kinds of things, people and pursuits.

We are constantly searching the for latest thing that will make us happy:

career fulfillment, fly fishing, a luxury car,

spin class, therapy, a new church,

a new relationship, living through our kids accomplishments,

gourmet vodka, marble countertops, triathlons,

you name it, the list is endless.

All these things are good, or at least they can be, but they are terrible gods.

(It's interesting, by the way, the first commandment does not say there are no other gods. It says don't put them before the Lord God. The ancient Israelites took for granted something we would do well to remember: the call to worship God does not occur in neutral territory: there are *dozens* of gods competing for our affection, our primary allegiance, our hearts.)

This morning, at any rate, I want to focus on three false gods,
three good things we settle for
that keep us from true joy, true happiness, true and lasting fulfillment:

and those three things are work, wealth, and religion.

Work, wealth, and religion: Three **good things** that make terrible gods.

Let's take work first.

You are graduating and going into the world beyond college,
and whether you are going into further education, government, or the military -- into the
business, entertainment, or non-profit world --
no matter what you're doing, most if not all of you are going to be working.

For most of you, **work**, in one way, shape or form, is how you'll be spending the
majority of your waking hours for the next forty or fifty years.

And that's a good thing: work is a good thing.

Work is, or can be meaningful, in the literal sense of that word: full of meaning. While
many people work in what they consider meaningless jobs, your Wabash education has
positioned you well to find work that is more than just "something to pay the rent."

Through your work, you can not only support yourself and family, but make significant
contributions to your community, the nation, and even the world.

Work is good. At least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is even a God-given thing: God
himself worked in the beginning of creation, and God blesses human labor.

Work is a good thing.

But it is a terrible god.

Perhaps you've heard the story about the American businessman who was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village.

A small boat with just one fisherman docked there.

Inside the small boat were several, large, yellow fin tuna.

The American complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The man said only a little while.

The American then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish?

The Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs: I keep one fish for my family's dinner; I trade the other one for bread and vegetables and whatever else we need for the day.

The American then asked, but what do you do with the rest of your time?

The fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife,

stroll into the village each evening
where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos

I have a full and busy life, *senor*."

The American [scoffed,] "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and instead of just bartering, sell the fish, and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat.

The fisherman was intrigued. "What then?"

"With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats.

Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery.

You would control the product, processing and distribution.

Yes? What then?

"Well, you'd need to leave this village and move to Mexico City,

then LA and eventually New York City, where you'll run an expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But how long will this all take?”

To which the American replied, “15-20 years.”

“But what then, senor?”

The American [laughed] and said “that's the best part! When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make *millions!*”

“Millions,” the fisherman replied, “Then what?”

The American said, “Then you would retire
and move to a small coastal fishing village
where you could **sleep** late, **fish** a little, **take siesta with
your wife**, stroll into the village each evening sip wine play guitar with your
friends...”

Why do you spend your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Oh the **effort** we expend searching for that which is right in front of us...
working for that which is already ours,
trying to earn that which is gift.

Oh, the **energy** we expend...

We as a people have trouble slowing down.
We're in a hurry to do just about everything.

(I heard someone on the radio the other day being interviewed, an author
who has written a book on the “art of slowing down.”

At one point in the interview he said that **we ought to find a way, as a culture, to
slow down, all of us** – and that as part of that effort, perhaps we could set aside, say, one
day a week, to do nothing...it would be...we could call it, a “day of rest,” in which
people would do no work...!)

Yeah, why didn't God think of that?!?

Now again, work is a good thing. A god-given thing. A thing that is meant to bring us joy. But work is a terrible god, it is a terrible center.

The antidote to making work the center of our life – the way to dethrone work from the throne of our heart and put God back there – **is through the commandment to rest**, really rest, trusting in God’s care one day out of seven.

The commandment to rest is designed to put us in touch, on a regular basis, with the God-shaped hole in our life... to force us to quit “doing” and just “be” on a regular basis, so we are forced, on a regular basis, to ask the big questions....

where is it all going?

Who, or what is at the center of my life, what’s driving me? What difference am I making, what difference do I make?

A second good thing that makes a terrible god is **wealth**.

Wealth – money, riches, and the things money can get us – are good things, but are probably the one thing we are most likely to try to fill our god-shaped hole with.

Which reminds me of another story – this one takes place at a major university.

There was this huge faculty meeting, everyone all gathered around a big table.

All of a sudden, in the middle of the meeting, an **angel** appears out of nowhere, and hovers right above the dean of the faculty!

The angel says, “I have been sent to reward you for your years of dedication and hard work. I have been authorized to grant you one of three desires.

You may have **beauty**, and be the handsomest man in the world.

Or you may have **money**, and be the wealthiest man in the world.

Or you may have **wisdom**, and be the wisest man in the world.

Choose.”

Without hesitating, the dean says “wisdom!”

“Granted!” the angel says, and with a poof! disappears.

The dean of the faculty just sits there, with this glow and kind of a faint halo all around him...the rest of faculty just sits there, stunned, in silence.

Finally, one of the faculty members says, “SAY something!”

The dean says, “I should’ve taken the money....”

Part of the reason we like that joke is that we think it’s true!

- we really do think there is great wisdom in making a lot of money.
- We think there is happiness in making a lot of money.
- We think – despite all evidence and other people’ experience to the contrary – that money, or the adventures or possessions money can buy – will fill that gnawing empty space inside of us, and make us happy.

Now again, let’s remember: there is nothing wrong with money, per se.

Wealth, riches, can be good.

- The work that I did in **inner city Nashville**,
- and on the **board of directors of Samaritan Ministry for the homeless of Washington D.C.**
- and years of taking teenagers to "habitat for humanity" mission trips to help relieve some of the unimaginable **poverty in the Appalachian mountains**

has taught me not to romanticize poverty.

Involuntary poverty is awful.

And wealth -- as anyone who has received a grant from the Lilly Foundation can tell you! -- can accomplish a lot of good!

Wealth is a good thing, a God-given thing. A thing that is meant to bring us joy.

The danger comes when we think wealth will give us contentment...
fill us up...
satisfy our hunger.
fill our God-shaped hole.

Wealth is a terrible god.

Like all false gods, wealth (money, riches, and the things money can buy us) – demand more and more and more from us and give back less and less and less.

Alcoholics have a slogan: first you have the drink, then the drink has you.

If we're honest about it, it's the same with money:

First we have the money – the car, the house –
then the money, the car, the house has us.

The antidote to making wealth the center of our life –
the way to dethrone wealth from the throne of our heart
and put God back there –
is through the commandment to give away a percentage of it –
to let go of some of it.

You can talk about prayer, sacraments, service to others all day long, you can talk about God being the source of your strength and your security until you are blue in the face, but there is no better way to acknowledge your dependence on God than to let go of some of your money.

There was a man out taking a hike on a mountain trail. He slipped and started falling down the cliff face, and just at the last second grabbed a hold of a root. He was hanging there, holding on for dear life – he looked down and there below him, at least a couple hundred yards, was nothing but jagged rocks. He looked above him and nothing but smooth cliff face, no way to climb back up. He was not a particularly religious person, but he was desperate and so he cried out, “IS ANYONE UP THERE?” Much to his surprise, he heard a voice from heaven say, “It is I, the creator of the universe and all that is in it. You have nothing to fear, you need only to let go.” He looked down again...looked back up...and said, “is anyone ELSE up there?”

And so I challenge you, seniors, before you've received your very first post-college paycheck, to commit to letting go of ten percent of everything that comes into your pocket.

(If your cynicism level is rising and you think I am starting to sound like I'm trying to raise money for something, let me make it clear – I don't care *who* you give the money to, pick a charity any charity. Pick a cause, any cause, as long as it is outside yourself. Just get in the habit of giving away ten percent of your money, for the sole purpose of breaking its stranglehold on you, and as a way of acknowledging your dependence on God alone.)

And speaking of acknowledging our dependence on God alone, let's consider the third good, and God-given thing that makes a bad god.

And that is religion.

Like many of you, perhaps, I have a love-hate relationship with religion.

On the one hand, religion is my livelihood, my interest, my passion. While I did not *major* in religion while I was here, two religion professors – Eric Dean and Bill Placher -- took me under their wing, mentored me. Like all good teachers, they acted as midwives, patiently coaxing good ideas out of me.

They *needed* patience with me, because I frequently railed against religion, religious people, and religious hypocrisy.

But one day Eric Dean gave me a challenge that I will never forget: He said, **“John, name anything that frustrates you about religion, and you can find that same frustration somewhere in Scripture itself.”**

“Name anything that angers you about religious people or religious hypocrisy,” (he went on), “and you can find that same anger expressed somewhere in Scripture itself – and, I might add, put a good bit more eloquently.”

He knew what he was doing.

His challenge led me to “pick up and read,” pick up the Bible and read Amos and Hosea and Isaiah –

and there I read about –

-- not just read about, but encountered –

a God who, throughout history, sees things being done in his name that are not only NOT in keeping with his goodness and love, but are antithetical to his goodness and love.

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts,
I cannot stand your assemblies.
Away with the noise of your songs,
I will not listen to the melody of your harps
But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21ff)

And not just the prophets.

I know this is a mixed congregation with many different beliefs about who Jesus was, but no matter what your belief system – lifelong Baptist, recent convert to Catholicism, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Unitarian, agnostic, curious atheist --

no matter what your beliefs -- read any one of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John -- straight through, in one sitting, and ask yourself: what image of Jesus emerges from that reading?

When we read the gospels the way we normally do – as short passages divided up into distinct stories, parables, or teachings, we get snapshots – stills – of Jesus and his life and ministry.

But when we read the entire gospel in one sitting, we get the *motion picture* of Jesus and his ministry.

When we read one gospel story and study it, we get a good idea of one leaf. On one branch. Of one tree.

When we read the entire gospel in one sitting, we see the *forest*.

Read in one sitting, the picture of Jesus that emerges is not as someone who was primarily a healer, or primarily a teacher, or even preacher, but as someone who was primarily
 a *provocateur*,
 a radical-challenger-of-religious-status-quo.

(Brought up to think that Jesus was a meek, mild, soft-spoken gatherer-of-children-into-his-lap-type person, this image surprises me, shocks me, even.

But then I re-read a gospel, any gospel (again, front-to-back and all at once) and Jesus as provocateur is an inescapable conclusion!)

Time after time he deliberately provokes the scribes and Pharisees, and when he has a chance to back down, instead of backing down, deliberately increases the stakes.

Read in one sitting, the hallmark of the gospels is not (as we suppose from hearing the stories in bits and pieces) primarily about healing-the-sick, feeding-the-crowds, or teaching the disciples,

It is rather proclaiming the-Kingdom-of-God-is-at-hand, a topsy-turvy, radical re-orienting of the world and the world's priorities.

And the hallmark of the Kingdom of God is love.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”

One day, one of the teachers of the law came and asked Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mk 12:28, NIV)

Jesus said, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
 you shall love the Lord your God
with all heart, and with *all your soul*, and with *all your mind*,
 and with *all your strength*.
 The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
 There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. All the rest is commentary.

Religion is a good thing, a God-given thing, but throughout the centuries, religion has domesticated, tamed, and emasculated this radical, yet very simple message.

Worse than that, religion has for many people throughout the ages taken God’s rightful place at the center of our hearts, *so our religion, and not God himself*, becomes our reason for being, our passion.

Seniors, you are living at an extraordinary time.

There is, going on in this country and around the world,
a convergence of two massive historical trends:

a great spiritual hunger
 and an almost complete indifference to denominational affiliations.

Your generation is spiritually hungry, and yet is impatient with religion that has lost its focus.

You’re in good company.

Because the antidote to religion-as-a-false-god
 is God himself,
 working through the broad scope of salvation history,
 to burn away, like a restorative forest fire,
 the deadwood and old growth that suffocates life on the ground.

So -- “seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts.”

Seek the Lord, *and you will* find him,
call upon him, *for he is* near;

forsake the way of false gods:

remember to rest in the Lord one day in seven
remember to let go of one tenth of what you’ve been given
seek a faith community
that has loving God and loving one’s neighbor at its center

Those waters will quench your thirst!

That bread will satisfy your hunger!

With God at your center, your God-shaped hole filled with him,

Life in its fullest awaits you.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 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, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. ...

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

