

## What is God's Joy [OR Hummies, Hippos, and Humans]

Luke 12:32-40 and Genesis 15:1-6

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on August 7, 2022

My daughter will tell you that I get pretty intense about our hummingbird visitors. I come by it honestly. Granddad and Grandma Ruth had extensive seed feeders for the birds. Teaching us bird names and sounds whenever we visited. My sister lives in a rural setting and has a bear and squirrel proof feeder. Mom and Larry had feeders until life became complicated both by health issues and the grackles who chased away the other birds. I keep things simple with my single hummingbird feeder outside my kitchen window. Visiting hummies bring joy all summer. Some trill as they swoop in for the nectar. Others are as stealth as a secret. I don't know what it is about watching animals eat but I also follow several creatures on Instagram whose mealtime videos make me smile – Rico the porcupine crunching corn, Lightning the sloth slurping banana, and Fiona the hippo crushing watermelon.<sup>1</sup> Andy, our Minister of Music with an office next to mine, has been subjected to my sharing these silly videos of animals eating. Anyway, what could this possibly have anything to do with today's readings?

Between last week's parable about the rich fool and this week's teaching about God's good pleasure in giving the kingdom, Jesus teaches about God feeding the birds and dressing fields of grass.<sup>2</sup> God feeding the creatures leads into our Luke reading this morning. Have no fear, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. God's good pleasure. God's joy. While Jesus is teaching the disciples and "the crowd gathered in thousands," he pauses to highlight God's joy in sustaining their creatureliness by calling them "little flock."<sup>3</sup> I don't believe for a second that we're as cute as eaters as Rico the porcupine or my hummie visitors, but I do think it's good to wonder about God's joy when it comes to us as God's creatures.

In the Genesis reading, God tells Abram that his descendants can be counted by stargazing. *Actually* counting the stars is an impossible task. God is asking Abram

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<sup>1</sup> Check out videos of these animal friends here:

<https://search.yahoo.com/search?fr=mcafee&type=E210US714G0&p=cincinatti+zoo+animals+eating+videos>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:22-31

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:1 describes the crowd.

to step outside, in the dark of night, and look up to experience the beauty of joy. My brother Kevin likes to talk about how we're star-babies because we're made of the same molecular compounds found across the universe. Abram didn't know that. But he had faith that God was God. He knew that the God of the stars was the God he understood very little about even as he trusted God to keep God's promises. God invited Abram into joy even though he couldn't see it yet.

In Jesus' example in Luke, the master shows up ready to serve which is ridiculous. Dinner is served to slaves by the one who is usually served. The Master dresses for action, belt fastened so that robes don't get in the way. Ready for action. Ready to feed. Ready for joy. The same action and joy that Jesus' commands his listeners to be dressed and ready for. First century slavery would make Jesus' statement silly. Our country's history of White Americans enslaving Black Africans puts Jesus' teaching about God into even starker contrast. Our collective imagination can barely grasp the absurdity of a God who serves slaves. Yet, here we are. Jesus is going for it, wanting the crowd, the disciples, and us to hear a good word about a reckless, extravagant God, <sup>4</sup>"filling the hungry with good things."

Hungry people require urgent action. I don't have a lot of patience for questioning whether or not people should be fed as if there is any justifiable situation where immediate food should be withheld. Hungry people need food. An anonymous note was left on our Sanctuary Soup Shelf last week that brings this idea to life. Here's what the note writer wrote:

"Hello – I am not one that is eloquent with words so I do hope the meaning (as my heart see it) come through this right now...I live approx. 15 mins away & was asked to stop by one night w/ a elderly woman that is pretty much a "shut in" with limited mobility (I drive and help where I can). The 24 Hour access to food is so much appreciated by those that do not always have a reliable form of transportation AND as she stated, coming here, especially @ night helps her try to maintain her pride. I appreciate how beautifully (organized) it's stocked. Thank you all!"

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:53 from Jesus' mother Mary's Magnificat (song)

The Soup Shelf note writer understands that immediate hunger needs immediate food. 24/7, anonymous food access at the Soup Shelf on the front of our sanctuary serves a small and emergent need. A few chapters before our reading today, Jesus understood immediate hunger, feeding 5,000 men, not to mention all the women and children too.<sup>5</sup> There's immediate need and then there's figuring out why people are hungry and structuring a society in which hunger doesn't exist. We're talking hunger that means poor nutrition and bellyaches.

500 years ago, Martin Luther, the namesake of the Lutheran Church, worked with the church and public leaders in his town to set up a system called the "Common Chest."<sup>6</sup> It was literally a chest with multiple locks and had to be opened by several key holders. The point was to make sure that needs were being met. Churches and princes working together to do so. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century times, faith driven community programs and legislation function similarly. Jesus teaches against fear and self-serving uses of money time and again. It's like he totally gets how much we distort money and its use for our own comfort and power. Our verses from today push Jesus followers then and now to sell our stuff and give alms. Alms are money that go directly to the immediate needs of people with immediate needs. Luther also took action and created a system between church, the princes, and the towns to meet those needs. You could tell the Reformation reached a town because people received both bread and wine at Holy Communion and because there was a Common Chest.

Immediate needs are not just about food, but what it takes to live. One of the indicators of a troubled society is when politicians start speeching about tougher laws, increased prison sentences, and more police. Yet law and order policies tend to put more people in prison, especially more black and brown people caught in the net of poverty related crimes for a host of other systemic problems. Prisons come at a high cost and incubate people in an environment with known risk factors for violent crime – shame, poverty, isolation, and exposure to more violence.<sup>7</sup> Prison exposes people to the things that increase the likelihood that

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:14; Matthew 14:21; Mark 6:44 – Feeding the 5,000

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison. Video: The Common Chest Ensures that Everyone's Needs are Met.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaP423egx-0>

<sup>7</sup> Restorative Justice: Why Do We Need It? By Brave New Films  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8N3LihLvfa0&t=131s>

they will commit more crime. You know what's proven to reduce crime and increase public safety? Housing, education, and health care.<sup>8</sup> The very things that help people provide food for themselves. Yet we spend money on building more prisons rather than solve the problems that lead us to build them. Food insecurity is a sign that larger issues are at hand. That we even have a Soup Shelf out there meeting people's needs is a symptom not a long-term solution. Tackling those issues through the ballot box, putting our treasures where God's heart is, into the very programs that help the people for whom God's heart breaks, and building communities where each life is sacred is taking action.

Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Luke goes a long way in helping us see the joy in God's heart when God's creatures are sustained in living their lives. God's joy in giving away the kingdom is one of God's "now and not yet" promises. God's kingdom here and now means that, as Jesus followers, the Holy Spirit inspires us for action and joy when any of our fellow creatures need an extra boost from human friends – whether they're hummies or hippos or other humans. Creaturely comfort is a cooperative effort not an individual foot race. God's heart holds the birds and the lilies and us. That's a remarkable claim. And God knows that our heart follows our money. Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>9</sup> Jesus hardly lets up on the topic across the gospels. (At least, that's what it feels like right now for this preacher anyway.)

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is now and not yet. We are called to action in God's kingdom now, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and find incredible joy in God's joy of creation. And we're also promised God's kingdom when our earthly pilgrimage as God's creature is done. Have no fear, little flock, for God's joy includes you in the kingdom.

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<sup>8</sup> Consider doing your own quick web search on public safety and crime reduction. It's illuminating.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/01/03/new-evidence-that-access-to-health-care-reduces-crime/>  
<https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/policy-brief/how-better-access-mental-health-care-can-reduce-crime>  
<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2013/aug/15/affordable-housing-reduces-crime/>  
Why Does Education Reduce Crime? University of Chicago  
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/717895>

<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:34