

## *Be Gathered*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1 AND LUKE 13:31-35

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*How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34b)*

**M**Y SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU," the psalmist cried to God; "my body craves you like a dry, weary land without water" (Ps. 63:1). Every day those words appear in my morning prayer. Sometimes they come at other times of the day, and if I am very still they lead me to what someone called the "God-shaped hole" in the middle of my life, an emptiness only God can fill. Do you ever feel that craving?

What are you hungry for? How does that hole feel to you, the God-shaped one in the middle of your life? What is the deep, deep desire in your life, the way-down-deep one inside every other desire, the persistent one that seems never to be satisfied?

Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi wrote of a devout man who quit praying because for all his cries to God he never heard an answer. In a dream he was visited by an angel who told him, "This longing you express *is* the return message." "The grief you cry out from," Rumi went on to write, "draws you toward union. . . . Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe your craving for God is not a sign of God's absence but an experience of God's presence, drawing you toward the perfect union with the divine you desire. Maybe the inner loneliness, the hunger for insight and direction in life, the yearning for freedom from the constraints of your past, maybe these are signs of what John Wesley called "prevenient grace," the work of God in you long before you're even aware of it, drawing you closer to God.

Gather us in – the lost and forsaken, gather us in – the blind and the lame;  
call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we often try to fill that emptiness with something else. We turn to sex, to alcohol and other drugs, to food or gambling or shopping or other addictions. We think power or position or privilege will satisfy that hunger. If only we accumulate enough

possessions, enough "toys," we think the hunger will disappear. But neither wealth nor pride in our own accomplishments can satisfy the hunger. The only thing that will satisfy it is to give in to it, to surrender to the deepest hunger, the one that only God can fill, the hunger that is the sign of God's grace at work in us, drawing us closer to God.

Gather us in – the rich and the haughty, gather us in – the proud and the strong;  
give us a heart so meek and so lowly, give us the courage to enter the song.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread," God asked through Isaiah, "and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me," God pleaded, "and eat what is good . . . . Incline your ear, and come to me" (Isa. 55:2-3a). For here God "will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines" (Isa. 25:6). Here at this table, where we are in closest communion with God, God satisfies our deepest hunger with the banquet of heaven. So we feast at this table every week, not merely because it satisfies our hunger in ways that cannot be explained but because it *increases* our hunger, strengthening our connection with God.

Give us to drink the wine of compassion, give us to eat the bread that is you;  
nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Jesus yearned to gather the children of Jerusalem "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." He wasn't yearning to gather the "nations," to gather those who followed other gods; he knew God was already doing that (cf. Ps. 87). His yearning was for those who thought they had already been gathered, chosen as God's own, and who in their distracted complacency had slipped away from those sheltering wings without even knowing it.

Maybe it's not the "unchurched" we need to worry about; maybe it's ourselves, we who think we've been gathered but who wander away and, in the words of the sixteenth-century *Book of Common Prayer*, "have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts" rather than inclining our ear and coming to God.

Gather us in and hold us forever, gather us in and make us your own;  
gather us in – all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

NOTES: • 1. Jelal al-Din Rumi, "Love Dogs," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 155-56. • 2. This couplet and the three that follow are from "Gather Us In," *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2236.