

“The Snack That Satisfies”

August 9, 2009

Rev. Thom Larson

On a spring afternoon in 1946 in Oklahoma City, Don McClanen got hungry. His hunger wasn't for food. He could have gone to a nearby restaurant with the other men and women who were attending a physical education conference with him to take care of that hunger. His hunger was of a spiritual nature and he found himself sitting in the back pew of a church that happened to have an open door that welcomed him in. There he prayed a simple prayer: *“Lord, I surrender my will to you.”* It was for Don what he called his moment of real “conversion,” the beginning of a shift in his faith from believing things about God to living in relationship and obedience to God.

Surely the enzyme that had ignited McClanen's hunger was a speech given that morning by H. Clay Fisk, a school principal and former coach, who had challenged the P.E. teachers and coaches at the conference to live their lives in such a way that they led their student athletes “up the mountain instead of down the drain.” McClanen was anguished to think about the ways he was failing to be a Christian model to the students and athletes under his care. The

words of St. Paul rang in his ears: “*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*” (Romans 7:19)

From that point on, McClanen started to focus his life on how to satisfy the hunger he felt. He began to take note of prominent athletes who were open about being Christians. He collected articles about them from newspaper sports pages, from magazines like *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and from *Guideposts*, a national magazine that printed inspirational articles about people of faith. As his file of articles grew thicker with names of sports stars like Carl Erskine, and Lewis Evans and Otto Graham and Doak Walker, an idea began to formulate in his mind. Would it be possible to somehow connect these Christian super-athletes with the young men and women who almost worshipped them as idols in the hope of inspiring the youth of the nation to develop the wholesome principles of good character and clean living? Don shared his idea with the pastor of the Presbyterian Church he attended in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with other coaches and with friends, and the responses he received were always encouraging and positive.

In 1954, with the help of his wife, Gloria, Don McClanen put his idea into action. He sent out letters

to nineteen athletes, some of whom were professional, all-American, or Olympic stars, and others who were coaches of national championship teams inviting them to be part of a speakers bureau who would go to high schools and colleges to speak about their faith, their values, and the importance of building a solid foundation for life. Much to his surprise, fourteen of the nineteen invitations came back with positive responses indicating a willingness to be part of the organization. McClenan, also sent letters to the high schools and college campuses around the state of Oklahoma, all of who quickly came on board with great excitement that athletes of such fame and renown would come to their schools at so little expense.

The elation McClenan felt over the enthusiastic response to his vision quickly turned into terror as he realized he didn't have the money to pay for any of the athletes' travel or room and board. Nor had he ever met any of the athletes personally, face to face, and their reliability and their skill as speakers was completely unknown to him. Suddenly, he realized he was in way over his head and he needed the help and advice of others more skilled than he in bringing his vision to reality. He took out a loan for \$1,000, using the family car for collateral, and went to New York City where he consulted with the managing

editor of *Guideposts* to see what ideas he might have to bring McClenan's vision to fulfillment. Though supportive of McClenan's dream and sympathetic to his situation, the editor of the magazine was not in a position to offer anything more than his prayers ... and the suggestion that McClenan visit with Wesley Branch Rickey.

Do any of you recognize the name Branch Rickey? If you are a fan of professional baseball you might. Rickey is basically the inventor of modern baseball. He formed the first minor-league farm system. He also dismantled pro-baseball's color barrier by hiring Jackie Robinson to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, initiated the use of baseball helmets, and marketed the game to women as well as to men. He had managed his teams, the St. Louis Cardinals and the Brooklyn Dodgers to eight pennants and four World Series Championships. Rickey was also a devoted Christian with deep Methodist roots – his mother had insisted on naming him Wesley.

When McClenan entered Rickey's office for his appointment, he was warned by the receptionist that he had only five minutes of the busy sport executive's time. But the meeting lasted for five hours. Rickey was fascinated by McClenan's dream

of bringing professional athletes to influence youth for Christ. He was also inspired by the number of athletes whose faith in Christ McClenan had researched and who had committed to being part of his speaker's bureau. By the end of their meeting, Rickey had promised to help raise \$10,000 dollars to launch the project. He also wrote a four sentence endorsement of McClenan's plan of connecting sports stars with youth, confident that Don's vision had the potential for changing the youth scene in America in a decade. That meeting was the beginning of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the world's largest Christian sports organization. In 2008, 356,250 people on 7,125 campuses worked with more than 46,000 coaches and athletes around the world all to fulfill McClenan's dream of helping youth develop good character, clean living, and solid faith. Do you think McClenan is as hungry today as he was on that spring afternoon in 1946? Maybe not in exactly the same way – I think he would say that he's made progress in terms of what he has done with his life and what God has allowed him to accomplish. But I would also guess that as long as there is one young person, athlete or not, who is struggling with questions of faith, who is uncertain about what is important in life, who is having difficulty making choices that promote clean living and a healthy lifestyle, McClenan would be ready to offer his help

and use his connection with other athletes and coaches to help that young person discover the way to a better life. He would want their hunger to be satisfied in the grace and compassion of God, and in discovering the purpose for their lives, just as his hunger has been satisfied.

Don McLanen got hungry for living a better life and helping the young athletes under his care, and all the youth of the nation involved in sports activities develop strong characters, good values, and active faith. But I could have told you this morning about other people who got hungry. I could have told you about Millard Fuller who one day got hungry for providing affordable housing for people who were homeless. He left his multi-million dollar business and devoted himself to Habitat for Humanity. Or I could have told you about Mother Theresa who one day got hungry for taking care of the poor and the dying on the streets of Calcutta and left the safety and the seclusion of her convent and took her ministry of compassion out into the world. Or I could have told you about Cameron Townsend, who one cold night, camped on a mountain in Guatemala, in conversation with a Cakchiquel companion got hungry for translating the scriptures into the languages of all the world so that all people could hear the gospel in their native language. Or I could have told you about

thousands of other people who got hungry for doing the will of God and fulfilling the purpose for their lives. For all of these people the desire was for more than believing things about God. It was the desire to live in intimate relationship with God, doing the things God was asking them to do, acting with the grace, the compassion, and the goodness of Christ, demonstrating for the world to see the strength of their faith and the depth of their love for God and all of God's creation. They got hungry for righteousness.

I can't tell you for sure what drew me into Don McClenan's story this week. I came across it in the most recent issue of *Sojourner's Magazine*. Maybe it was because I will be going to Seattle this weekend with some of the Wednesday Workers for the Mariners'-Yankees' baseball game and I have sports on my mind. All I know is that when I read his story I encountered someone whose hunger for God and being God's person helped him to be more and accomplish more for himself and for his world than he ever would have accomplished by ignoring that hunger, or suppressing that hunger, or by trying to cover that hunger with some other substitute.

To be honest with you, his story has made me think about the hunger in my life and what will bring

the most fulfillment and satisfaction to me, too. And I know, I really know, that the only thing that can bring real joy and pleasure and satisfaction to my life is to be as completely as possible the human person God has it in mind for me to be. One of the interesting things about this beatitude has to do with it's Greek grammar. What a Greek reader would have seen, that our English translations are not able to convey is that the hunger isn't for partial righteousness. It isn't righteousness that does good some of the time. It isn't righteousness found in a person who does God's will a couple days of the week. It is a hunger for full righteousness – doing God's will all of the time ... being God's person every minute of every day ... living a life that reflects God's goodness and love in every word, in every thought, in every action. That's the life that I am hungry for. That's the kind of Christian I want to be. I bet that's what you're hungry for, too, ... eager to offer God your very best as you devote your life to doing God's will.

I don't know if I will ever have my hunger satisfied completely ... at least not in this lifetime. But I am confident about this ... having committed myself to God's will ... to a cause "that can never be lost or stayed," God and eternity are on my side. The challenges that come my way in doing God's will are

often difficult. The battles can be long. I may lose a battle or two. I will probably fall and fail ... I know I have already. I am sometimes frustrated by the personal inadequacies in my personal life. And more than once, more than twice, I've even been ashamed. Sometimes I look at the world in which I have invested my time, my effort, my life, and my prayers and it feels like little ground has been gained, the effort has resulted in little progress or success. But then I look at our Lord, the Author and the Finisher of my faith. And looking, I remember that he is on my side. He's with me, not against me. He's filling me with his love and power, not sucking my life away. And I know the battle will be won. I will be satisfied. My hunger will be filled. It can't be otherwise. It can't be otherwise.

If your hunger and thirst is for total, life-encompassing righteousness ... to be completely the human person God has created you to be ... to live at the very heart of all that is really important ... rejoice and be glad ... for your hunger will be filled by the bread of life ... your thirst will be satisfied by the cup of forgiveness. The only snack that fully satisfies is the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ. And receiving that love we are filled to overflowing.
Amen.