

HUNGRY – FOR BREAD FROM HEAVEN

TEXT: John 6:24-35

Jesus talked a lot about bread. Last week, as we looked at the familiar story about the loaves and fish that came from a little boy's lunch box, we saw how important it was to Jesus that people be fed; that the hungry be given the sustenance they need and that we need to follow in that same path today.

Today's reading follows last week's reading. Jesus is still being followed by the crowds. The 5000 or so folks are hungry once again. Since Jesus had fed them the day before, why not today? Even though Jesus had sailed through the night to the other side of the Lake, he knew that these people would not give up. And, sure enough, the group got into their boats and set out to find him. When they did find him, they asked the same question they had posed before – what kind of a sign are you going to give us to prove who you really are? What can you give us that will get our allegiance? Jesus, of course, sees through this kind of ruse. They don't want a sign. They want bread.

Bread was the staple of life. The Romans understood this, so they used bread and circuses to distract the people, essentially allowing them to do as they pleased. When the crowds began to demand more liberty, they offered more bread. It was simple and relatively cheap (at least it was cheaper than expanding the military).

But Jesus responded to their demands by turning the physical into the spiritual. The people wanted bread – like the bread Moses provided in the wilderness (though truth be told the people got tired of manna and asked for an expanded menu). But Jesus had another kind of bread in mind. He told the people that it wasn't Moses who gave the people bread, it was God. Now God would offer them bread, just a different kind of bread – the bread of life.

The story of the Exodus and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness with Moses in the lead was an important legacy for these people. They firmly believed that

when hunger became rampant among the exiles, Moses was the catalyst for the provision of food. So in our story today, they equate Jesus with Moses, as he was able to provide enough bread to feed the entire crowd, with a lot of crumbs left over. Since the bread from heaven that sustained the wanderers came through the miracle of Moses, surely Jesus carried the same powers and bread would be forthcoming whenever it was necessary.

But Jesus certainly was not the reincarnation of Moses, and providing continued sustenance for the crowd was not the way Jesus cared for the people. Bread for the body's hunger lasted only a short while. Bread for the soul was eternal.

Of course, this is where things begin to get a little tricky. During the Exodus the people were hungry, Moses fed them. The people on the Galilean hillside were hungry, Jesus fed them. To the people, that was pretty clear, pretty cut and dried. But the writer of John's Gospel makes the more important case that neither Moses nor Jesus were responsible for the bread-baking. If the people didn't get that message, they would never understand what was going on.

Jesus was very aware of the dangers of a faith that is based on tangible results. Whenever you get whatever it is you asked for, it's only a matter of time before you begin to wonder, and then you need something more to bolster your faith. Perhaps that is why Jesus was so harsh with the crowd. He was aware that they weren't looking for the new life of God's peace and justice and freedom. They weren't following Jesus because they believed he was bringing them this new life. They were following him because they were looking for some kind of visible confirmation so they could believe. They did not realize that their need was based not on physical hunger but for a spiritual hunger that no earthly bread could satisfy.

Jesus was calling them to a completely different kind of faith. He was calling them to "throw your lot in with the One that God has sent". That meant throwing their lot in with God's cause.

That kind of faith is not easy. It's very much like Abraham and Sarah setting out on a journey without even knowing where they were going. That kind of faith without external props can feel incredibly uncertain. It deals with "things hoped for" and "things not seen". It's difficult to wrap your arms around that kind of faith and get a firm grip on it. It's no wonder most of us prefer to place our faith in something concrete, something we can see and touch. But at the end of the day, all those seemingly reliable *objects* of our faith fall short. They all let us down. And we really shouldn't be surprised at that. Because those "perishable things" that we put so much of our faith in simply lack the ability to satisfy our deepest need. What we need is the life that only God can provide.

I think Jesus knew that we all have a tendency to put our faith in things that ultimately cannot satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. St. Augustine put it this way: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you". The only "bread" that can truly satisfy our hunger is the bread from heaven that God offers us. And the amazing truth is that when we take the risk of "throwing in our lot with the one whom God sent" to carry out God's cause in the world, we find that somehow we experience a peace, a freedom, a quality of life that none of those perishable things" can possibly provide. When we take the risk of faith and begin to quiet our restless hearts, we find the life God offers us truly satisfies us in ways we may never have expected.

There were lots of complainers in the crowd. And some things are worth complaining to God about. Sometimes, asking God for assurance that God is still with us is understandable, even appropriate. When Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves", I do not think Jesus was scolding the crowd for seeking bread because they were hungry. I think Jesus was disappointed that the crowd did not expect more, not more bread but something more. Perhaps Jesus was thinking more about ending hunger than serving up more bread. Moses and Aaron, not to mention God, may have been disappointed that Israel did not expect more, not an Egyptian deli in the desert, but that the God who delivered them from slavery would also sustain them in the desert.

This is easy to see and even easier to say because we know the end of God's story, for us and for the world, as well as for the people in the Bible – manna, quail, promised land; suffering, death, resurrection, water, word, table; abundant and eternal life. So why don't *we* expect more from God? Why do we settle for signs of God's grace – bread from whatever source – rather than seeking and expecting God's immortal love for us? Could it be that we work for the food that perishes, rather than the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Humanity give us, because we are unwilling or unable to name what we truly hunger for and seek?

So – some questions to ponder this week:

- What do you think Jesus is getting at when he speaks of “working for the food that endures”?
- Have you ever known hunger? If so how do you think you hear Jesus' words today differently as a result of that hunger experience?
- What disciplines help you keep in touch with your hunger for the “food that endures?” Do you fast? How do you pray? What role does regular worship play in this for you?

Jesus is the bread that fulfills all our hunger and thirst. Jesus frees us to follow him not to achieve self-satisfaction, not to get anything that is in it for us, not even to attain or maintain peace of mind. Jesus frees us to embrace God's redeeming will to restore the cosmos to what God created and humanity to what God intends. Such faith does not mean separating the spiritual out of the social. It means putting God rather than us at the center of both. When we do, we can and will expect more. Amen.