

Exodus 16:1-4
John 6:22-35
Communion

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 1, 2021

The Bread of Heaven

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

A month after the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites came to the wilderness of Sin, located between Elim and Sinai. The people were complaining because back in their bondage in Egypt, they did not experience hunger, as they have now in the wilderness. God promises bread from heaven. Listen to these words from Exodus 16:1-4...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we hear Jesus speak to the crowd of people who have been fed by the five loaves and two fish. He tells of a different kind of bread that also comes from heaven, declaring that he is in fact that bread of life. Listen to these words from John 6:22-35...

Sermon

In nineteenth-century China there were people who went to church because they were hungry. They converted, joined the church, were baptized, and remained active members, as long as their needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their situation improved and they and their families no longer needed gifts like rice, then they began to drift away from the church. Thus, missionaries called them “Rice Christians.”

Well, the crowds that followed Jesus to Capernaum after he fed the five thousand in the wilderness were similar to those “Rice Christians.” Rather harshly, Martin Luther called them, “uncouth and coarse people who were interested solely in eating and drinking.” Like those today who see faith and church as something they can use for their own purposes. They look for

temporal benefits, not for spiritual sustenance. Some use religion to gain prestige, promote their business, or gain political votes. So, we shouldn't get too excited by large crowds. They may not all be present for the right reasons.

In our lesson from John today the narrative is carried along by three questions asked of Jesus by the crowd—questions that Jesus responds to, but at a deeper level than they are asked. Their first question is:

Rabbi, when did you come here? (v. 25b)

And Jesus replies to the question this way:

Very truly, I tell you, you are not looking for me because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal. (vv. 26-27)

Jesus warns them not to be so preoccupied with the food that still leaves you hungry the very next day, but with the food that endures for eternal life. Not that Jesus thought of food as unimportant—after all, he had just fed five thousand with five loaves and two fishes from a young boy's lunch.

Jesus says that it is possible to work for a food that nourishes something more than the body, something that can endure to eternal life. Later Jesus will identify himself with that food.

According to John, at the heart of the Gospel is the message that Jesus' miracles are extraordinary deeds that change the lives of needy people—the sick, the hungry, the dying, the lost. But the results are not complete unless the miracles are also perceived as signs pointing to the eternal gift of God in Jesus. Here the crowds are so preoccupied with the temporal that they cannot see the eternal.

Rev. Richard Blanchard lived near Montreat, North Carolina, in the last years of his life.

He was the author of that lovely hymn, "Fill my Cup, Lord."

Like the woman at the well I was seeking
 For things that could not satisfy;
 And then I heard my Savior speaking:
 "Draw from my well that never shall run dry".

Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up, Lord!
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
 Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more
 Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!
 (v. 1 and refrain)

A student in a young adult Sunday School class approached the teacher with a question:
 "When Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, did he mean that we must get rid of everything?"

The teacher answered with a story: "Once there was a man who listened to the Scripture. One day he heard Jesus quoted as saying to the rich man, 'Go! Sell all that you have, give to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven, and come follow me'."

"The student stiffened. This was a word to him for he, like the rich man, was seeking salvation. So, first he sold his car. After he gave the money away, he again listened, and heard Jesus say, 'Sell all!' "

"Next he sold his house. After he gave the money away he listened again, and thought he heard Jesus say, 'Sell all!' "

"All that he had left was his Bible, which he sold for a few dollars. When he gave the money away, he again listened. But this time he heard nothing."

The student said, "Teacher, I don't understand this story. Why did the man hear nothing?" The teacher answered,

He heard nothing because he sold something that brought him the voice of God. We are not asked to rid ourselves of those things that draw us close to the heart of God. Jesus told the man to sell everything because his possessions were an idol. We must rid ourselves of whatever stands in the way of God. Now you must decide whether the things you own bring you close or separate you from God.

The crowd's second question follows Jesus' answer to the first:

What must we do to perform the works of God? (v. 28)

This time Jesus answers:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. (v. 29)

They have understood Jesus enough to want to push him to find out what they can do to get beyond this continuous pursuit of unsatisfying solutions. But instead of identifying certain works, Jesus directs them to believe in him as the one whom God has sent. Sounds simple enough, but even his disciples find it difficult. Jesus speaks of it as "the work of God," meaning that it is not only what God desires, but also what God gives.

The miracle, the sign that really matters is then the miracle of faith. Therein does God break through the misconceptions we hold about life, our pursuit of answers, our treasures on earth, to reveal the fundamentally new life embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. For to believe in Christ and the things for which he stands, the way of life he teaches, the God whom he reveals, the grace and help he came to offer us, the victory he makes possible for the least likely of us, is to have the doors of faith flung open and infinite new possibilities presented to us. But it all starts with believing in him whom God has sent.

Now, this believing *in* him is different from believing *about* him. Someone may say, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God." He has sound doctrine; but does he have faith? Does he trust Jesus with his life? Does he know the forgiveness of Christ? Does he seek to live his life in the light of the love and truth of Christ? Does he trust that Jesus has gone to prepare for him an

eternal home in heaven? Believe *in* Christ, not just believe *about* Christ. As John Calvin reminds us, he who believes in Christ has passed from death unto life.

The third and final question of the crowd to Jesus is:

What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may believe you? (v. 30)

A strange request, given the recent miracle of feeding just performed. But they want Jesus to do it again, comparing it to the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness.

Immediately Jesus answers that it was not really Moses who gave the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives freely and without limit. And the true bread from heaven is not manna, but the bread which comes from heaven and gives life to the world. They respond:

Sir, give us this bread always. (v. 34)

And Jesus said to them:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (v. 35)

In other words, the same God who gave food in the wilderness, the food that satisfied the people's hunger for a day, that same God now offers bread from heaven that will satisfy eternally.

My friends, it's all well and good that we support ministries that provide food for hungry people. Ministries like Good Neighbor Cupboard and Meals on Wheels and the Anderson Emergency Soup Kitchen. But let us remember that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. And that the church offers a bread that lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the world or the church. A gospel that calls for faith in the only begotten Son of God, who offered his broken body and shed blood for us and for our salvation. For new and eternal life. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. For new and eternal life. Amen. And Amen.