

Putting Our Trust in the Bread of Life

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Exodus 16:9-18, 31 ⁹Moses said to Aaron, "Tell the whole community to come and stand before the LORD, because he has heard their complaints." ¹⁰ As Aaron spoke to the whole community, they turned toward the desert, and suddenly the dazzling light of the LORD appeared in a cloud. ¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, ¹²"I have heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them that at twilight they will have meat to eat, and in the morning they will have all the bread they want. Then they will know that I, the LORD, am their God." ¹³ In the evening a large flock of quails flew in, enough to cover the camp, and in the morning there was dew all around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew evaporated, there was something thin and flaky on the surface of the desert. It was as delicate as frost. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they didn't know what it was and asked each other, "What is it?" Moses said to them, "This is the food that the LORD has given you to eat." ¹⁶ The LORD has commanded that each of you is to gather as much of it as he needs, two quarts for each member of his household." ¹⁷ The Israelites did this, some gathering more, others less. ¹⁸ When they measured it, those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little. Each had gathered just what he needed.... ³¹ The people of Israel called the food manna [which in Hebrew means "What is it?"]. It was like a small white seed, and tasted like thin cakes made with honey.
- John 6:24-35 (Good News Bible) ²⁴ When the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they got into those boats and went to Capernaum, looking for him. ²⁵ When the people found Jesus on the other side of the lake, they said to him, "Teacher, when did you get here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: you are looking for me because you ate the bread and had all you wanted, not because you understood my miracles. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils; instead, work for the food that lasts for eternal life. This is the food which the Son of Man will give you, because God, the Father, has put his mark of approval on him." ²⁸ So they asked him, "What can we do in order to do what God wants us to do?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he sent." ³⁰ They replied, "What miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, just as the scripture says, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² "I am telling you the truth," Jesus said. "What Moses gave you was not the bread from heaven; it is my Father who gives you the real bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread that God gives is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ "Sir," they asked him, "give us this bread always." ³⁵ "I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus urges us to believe in him, to put our trust in him, so we'll realize how God fills our lives with God's strength and comfort and blessing.

Mary and I had a good vacation. We relaxed with family for a few days. For a week we traveled through the Deep South to a number of sites significant to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We drove to Little Rock and Memphis, Montgomery and Birmingham and Atlanta. We love to talk about what we saw and what we experienced. But first I want to tell you about what we ate.

As we headed into Birmingham, Alabama, Mary was doing some online searches. She came across great reviews for a restaurant near our hotel, a place called Dale's Southern Grill. It was praised for its home-cooked versions of traditional Southern favorites. The first night (yes, we went back the next night) I had grilled meatloaf with cheesy grits. Mary had pecan roasted chicken with fried green tomatoes. For side dishes Dale's offers thirty-seven options including mac-and-cheese, turnip greens, okra, and their carrot soufflé was unbelievable. The peach cobbler *a la mode* was a show-stopper both nights. And you also get bread – not just bread, though. You have your choice of fresh-baked yeast roll, or a fluffy biscuit, traditional cornbread or jalapeño cornbread, or their most popular choice (according to our cute-as-a-button-southern-belle server Sarah) their home-made raisin-bran muffin. One place. Five breads. Sort of the United Nations of breads.

Bread is one of the most common foods around the world. As we often see here on World Communion Sunday, breads come in many forms and shapes and colors from white pita bread or Indian naan to yellow corn tortillas to dark pumpernickel. Loaves round or oblong, crusty or soft, puffy or flat, of wheat or corn or barley or other grains.

I mention Dale's and their breads this morning because in today's gospel selection bread was a metaphor Jesus used to describe himself. Not bread as in "money," or even as "daily bread" for the stomach to power one's muscles and nerves. Jesus said we should see him as what he called "the bread of life." What would that mean? Let's come back to that in a moment.

Earlier in the same chapter from John's gospel Jesus had provided a miraculous picnic, feeding 5,000 people even though he only had at his disposal five loaves of barley bread and two dried fish. The Bible states that the crowd ate as much as they wanted, and there was so much bread left over that each disciple gathered up a basketful of bread scraps. We'd all agree that laying out such a meal was miraculous.

But while the crowd had been filled, it wasn't satisfied. The crowd wanted more. They wanted Jesus to do it again. They wanted him to prove that he was deserving of their desire to appoint him as their king. So they told him to perform a miracle that would convince them that they should follow him. After all, they said, "Our ancestors ate manna in the desert." They were, of course, referring to the story we heard from Exodus Chapter 16 in which God fed the wandering Israelites by covering the desert with something akin to thin pizza crust.

So, the day after Jesus had fed the 5,000, the crowd asked Jesus to perform a miracle.

Of course, the irony is obvious to us: they want a miracle to prove that Jesus is worth trusting... and yet isn't that exactly what Jesus had just done? Jesus just fed them and their 5,000 friends even though he started with only five loaves and two fish!

In fact, the people had made two requests. Yes, they asked Jesus for another miracle. And before that, they had asked, "What can we *do* in order to do what God wants us to do?"¹

The reason they asked for Jesus to perform another miracle was because of how Jesus answered their first question. When they asked "What can we do?" Jesus didn't tell them to *do* anything. He didn't rattle off a list of religious rituals to perform or charitable gifts to offer. He urged simply, "What God wants you to *do* is to *believe* in the one [God] sent."²

The crowd witnessed his miraculous power. They experienced it. So how is it possible that it didn't change them? How could they miss what God was doing right in their midst?

...Which I think prompts us to ask ourselves, "In our own lives, what obvious signs of God's power and presence are we completely missing?"

¹ John 6:28 Today's English Version (emphasis added)

² John 6:29 Today's English Version (emphasis added)

- Despite the numerous conflicts raging in the world, God's power also holds at peace tribal and nationalistic adversaries that otherwise might lash out at each other.
- For some, we're overlooking the God-given power simply to get out of bed and face the day, whether that day is always accompanied by chronic pain, or each day is marred by neglect from those we should expect to care, or it's yet another day of sadness, even hopelessness, the remnant of grief for the loss of loved ones. Yes, we might overlook the blessing of just being able to face each day.
- Perhaps we're overlooking the blessing of our ability to determine to a very large degree the grand path of our education and career.
- Perhaps we're overlooking the privilege many enjoy – the privilege of living in a society giving us liberty to pursue and express our individuality and to determine the kind of family life we'd like to craft.
- Perhaps a particularly stunning sunset or ferocious storm causes us to become keenly aware of the beauty and majesty of nature for a moment, but how often do we overlook God's hand in the ordinary, such as the agile sparrow at the birdfeeder or the canopy of stars forever watching from above?

What might we have missed because we've regarded God so casually? We've overlooked the simple truth that God has come *to* us in Jesus the bread of life. God invites us to accept Jesus completely. God awaits our welcoming Jesus as our partner in living. When we put our life's trust in God through Jesus the Son, we have not just what nourishes our bodies or calms our nerves or gives us courage to face difficult things. In Jesus God gives us the bread that feeds *all* of life, body *and* soul, in *every* circumstance we experience, today *and* forever.

How are we to respond? The Galilean crowd cried for yet another miracle. They asked for step-by-step instructions in hopes that they could become more likeable to God. Jesus told them – and Jesus says to us today – “Don't worry about what to do; focus on who to believe in.” Jesus urges us to believe in him, to put our trust in him, so we'll realize how God fills our lives with God's strength and comfort and blessing.