

Sunday, August 1, 2021
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13 (Year B)

John 6.24-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/328911075628984>

(Sermon begins at about 19:00)

“Give Us This Bread Always”

Today’s Gospel reading is reminiscent of the old “Who’s on First” comedy routine popularized by Abbott and Costello in the 1930s. The premise of the sketch is that the two comedians are discussing a baseball team and trying to determine which team members are playing which positions. Because the players have names such as “Who,” “What,” and “I Don’t Know,” answers to questioning about players and their positions come off as non-responsive. The humor is due to each member of the conversation using the same terms, but having differing understandings of the meaning of the terms used, naturally leading to talking in circles as they try to communicate. A humorous demonstration of how different frames of reference can lead to miscommunications and misunderstanding.

The same thing is happening in today’s reading from the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel according to John. But instead of “Who,” “What,” and “I Don’t Know,” the differing frames of reference revolve around “bread,” “eternal life,” and “the work of God.” Both parties—Jesus and the crowd—are talking about being fed. Only they have different ideas about what that means. Rather than being a source of humor, this is a source of frustration for all involved as they seek to define their terms and establish a common ground for communications. (But then again, this is an ongoing challenge in John’s Gospel.) In so doing, the interaction really does serve to highlight the miscommunications and misunderstanding in a way that actually serves to underscore Jesus’ message.

The basic chain of events is that a crowd of people is searching for Jesus because he fed the 5,000 the day before. Presumably some in the crowd were among those who had been fed. When they find Jesus, he tells it like it is: *You’re looking for me not because I demonstrated God’s power through signs and miracles, but because you just want me to give you more to eat. But you have it all wrong. The important thing is not what nourishes you physically, but what nourishes you spiritually. My message is that you need to focus on this spiritual work.* Okay, so the crowd seems to be coming around, as they then ask what they need to do to perform this spiritual work, this work of God. Jesus responds that they need to have faith and follow Jesus’ teachings. While unwritten, it is safe to assume that he means they need to focus on loving God and loving one another. After all, that was the foundation of all that he did, all that he preached. But then the crowd, having made a step forward, takes two steps back: *So, what are you going to do to prove that you are sent from God? Oh wait, we know! You can give us bread, just like Moses gave to our ancestors in the wilderness.* You can just see Jesus shaking his head as he responds with: *People, you’ve got it all wrong. It’s not about the bread. Well, it is, but it isn’t. It’s about that which truly nourishes you. And while physical bread nourishes the body, which is important, God is also concerned about nourishing your soul, your spirit. That’s why God*

sent me to be with you. To be the "bread of life" as it were. The people, still not getting it, respond with: Yes, that's what we want. Give us bread! At this point, Jesus probably does a palm slap and says: What I'm trying to tell you is that I am the bread of life. If you follow me, I will nourish you spiritually.

I'm sure they could go on like this for quite a while. Jesus trying to explain what he is all about, and the people just not quite getting it. Sure, they might make a little headway in understanding, only to slip back into old ways of thinking. Part of the problem is that Jesus is trying to teach the people that there is more to life than just the physical. There is also the spiritual. And in typical Jesus-fashion, he tries to teach them using common, everyday imagery. In this case, bread. The crowd, excited about what happened the day before with the feeding of the 5,000, naturally wants more of the same. But Jesus is trying to let them know that there is more to life, there is more to what he is about, than just providing physical sustenance. There is also spiritual sustenance, which is what he is truly about. So, he uses the image of "bread of life" as a means of trying to teach the people. But it just doesn't go as well as he would like.

Unfortunately, this is a case where both Jesus and the crowd are so hung up on their own perspectives that that they are just talking past each other. The reality is, this is not an either/or but a both/and. Its not about the physical being more important than the spiritual or vice versa. What this really comes down to is about meeting people where they are. By all indications elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus understands this. This is how Jesus typically operates. He meets people where they are. Which is always in the midst of physical need. Be it hunger, illness, infirmity, poverty, marginalization, or any other very real human condition. The reality is that people are not able to focus on, to work on, the spiritual, when they are still experiencing physical need, physical difficulties. Just like it's hard to focus on a task when you are sick or hungry or tired. The physical generally overrides our ability to deal with the less tangible spiritual side of things. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus does his best to convey that having physical needs met provides an opening to work on the spiritual needs. But the people haven't yet made that leap. Which is why they need the bread of life. Which is why they need Jesus.

The key to what Jesus is talking about is in his statement "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life" (Jn 6.27). Here, Jesus is not talking about the afterlife. That is not his focus. For Jesus, "eternal life" is "a mode of intimate, mutual indwelling with God that can begin here and now."¹ Eternal life is not about immortality or a future life in heaven, but is an image for living now in the presence of God. Now, not at some indetermined point in the future. As one commentator notes, "'Eternal life' means a life of intimacy with God that transcends time altogether, in that sense, a 'timeless' life of beauty and grace."²

This is admittedly a little difficult for the people to grasp. They need something more to go on. So, they ask for a sign. Never mind the fact that Jesus gave them a pretty big sign just the day before. He fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. What more do they need? But there again, that's our nature, isn't it? Our need for proof is insatiable. No matter how many signs are provided, we want more. We want bigger and better. The signs and miracles almost become a thing unto themselves, detracting from the real message. "The story dramatizes the idea that our faith, our trust, our deepest sense of assurance must have other

foundations. It can't rely on the ultimately flimsy ground of 'signs and wonders.' It must find bedrock elsewhere."³

Which is ultimately what Jesus is offering. If the crowd could just move beyond this hang-up with signs, this obsession with bread. Jesus lays it out plainly. Or as plainly as the Johannine Jesus ever does: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (Jn 6.35). While certainly a foreshadowing of what is to come—the institution of the Eucharist, as well as Jesus' death and resurrection—what Jesus is offering as the means to eternal life, the means to being fed and nourished spiritually, is through relationship with him. He is saying, *You want a sign? I'll give you a sign. I am the sign. I am the one who can and will show you the way to deeper relationship with God. All you have to do is follow me, and you will be fed. You will be nurtured and nourished in ways you cannot yet imagine.*

We can't be too hard on the people for not quite getting what Jesus is telling them. For getting hung up on bread. That was there most pressing need. Most of them were probably poor, living from hand to mouth. How can you think about such things as eternal life, as relationship with God, when your stomach is rumbling, when you don't know where your next meal is coming from? We live in a physical world, where we have physical needs. And until those needs are met, all else is deemed non-essential, even irrelevant.

Jesus is asking them, and us, to take a leap of faith. Not denying the physical but to trust that there is something more than our physical wants and needs. He tells them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6.29). That they need to have faith in him to show them the way to something far greater. As one commentator so beautifully summarizes:

For John, this is what "faith" is really all about: not merely intellectual assent to some particular set of claims, but rather a deeply relational, emotional, intellectual, existential trust in God, a bone-deep sense that God loves us and cares for us, and a consequent impulse to live with love, gratitude, and grace . . . The feeding of the five thousand, then, turns out to be an entryway into an even wider insight and invitation: God gives us not only our "daily bread," but also the bread of heaven, the bread of life itself. Humanity doesn't live on physical bread alone. There's another bread, another food that God provides, another manna in the wilderness . . . For just as Jesus is God's Word made flesh, he is also God's love made tangible, the bread that "gives life to the world" (John 6:33).⁴

Today's Gospel reading provides us with a timely reminder. Particularly as we currently have our own physical concerns. Not where our next meal is going to come from, but certainly about our own physical health and wellbeing. About how we are going to survive. Today's Gospel reminds us that sometimes we can become distracted by our physical needs and wants, crying out "Give us this bread always!" (Jn 6.34). And while the physical is important, Jesus reminds us that there is something more. Something only he can offer: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Indeed, give us this bread always. Not just so that we are fed, not just so that we might survive, but so

that we may thrive and grow into the fullness of who we were created to be as beloved children of God.

¹ “Bread: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Tenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, July 27, 2021.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-christian-lectionary>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.