

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not 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.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

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.”

---

Funny thing about bread. When you bring yeast to life with hot water and honey, and then mix it with flour, you start a metabolic reaction that makes the dough begin to ferment and rise. If enough time passes, that same metabolic reaction can also feed the bacteria that will make the dough begin to decay. There’s a very fine line between fermenting and rotting.

My family is friends with the family that runs Le Panier, the French bakery at the Pike Place Market. And they will tell you that, in France, the attitude about bread is different than the attitude in much of America. In France, people buy just enough bread for that day because bread that is life-giving does not last for long.

Here, many of us expect bread to keep in storage and so we buy bread that has been baked, shipped and shelved full of chemical preservatives intended to make the bread last, sometimes for weeks. The trade-off is bread with far less nutritional value that may even be harmful to our health.

John’s Jesus is working in a similar space between life-giving fermentation and debilitating decay. In a brief opening of awareness, Jesus tries to redirect some inquiring minds. Just the day before, a crowd of people filled themselves with bread. They have not yet

understood that bread to have been a sign of God's love. They are well acquainted with physical hunger. Now, they are also noticing a spiritual hunger.

They don't quite know what to do when they wake up to find that Jesus and the disciples are gone. And so some of them get in their boats and cross the sea to Capernaum. They go looking for Jesus.

Searching and finding is a central theme in John's Gospel. The first phrase that John's Jesus spoke to Andrew and another disciple as they began following him was: "What are you looking for?" Jesus will ask twice at his arrest: "Whom do you seek?" At the tomb, Jesus will ask Mary Magdalene, the first to see the Risen Christ: "Whom do you seek?"

This morning's reading comes on the day after a huge crowd of people *thought* they had found what they were looking for – the perfect candidate for a new king. Some of them have since gone off to other pursuits, but many of them have come across the sea with questions for Jesus. Their curiosity is the opening Jesus needs to refine their awareness a little.

Jesus knows what they are *looking* for. The crowd does not yet understand what they have truly *seen*. But they are here and they are open to learning. Their question, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" tells us a little about their state of mind.

At yesterday's feeding of the larger crowd, they called Jesus "the prophet." Today, having adjusted their expectations, they call him "Rabbi," teacher, "when did you come here?" They are not asking Jesus to tell them about the timing of his boat trip. The question is a colloquialism that English can't quite capture. The Greek literally translates as "When did you *become* here?" They want to know where Jesus stands in the social hierarchy and where he is getting the authority to speak and act as he does.

And Jesus, like any great spiritual teacher, lets them steep in this state of unknowing for a while. When he responds, first he puts his personal reputation on the line; "Very truly, I tell you," which means "I give you my word of honor."

And then he offers them an opening – a gateway from what they *think* they have found to what actually stands in front of them:

“You seek me not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves and were fully filled,” he says. “Do not labor for perishable food, but for the food that abides unto life in the Age, which the Son of Man will give you; for God has placed his seal on this one.”

Jesus is not scolding or chastising them. He is orchestrating a powerful teaching moment. He is allowing the moment to work on them; letting them be just off-balance enough to start fine-tuning their awareness.

These folks ate a banquet of bread with 12 baskets-full leftover. And Jesus told his disciples specifically to gather up the fragments left over so that nothing would be lost.” These people were *part* of what was gathered – part of what would not be lost.

And so it makes sense that they have come looking to repeat an experience so amazing that it reminded them of God’s manna that fed their ancestors wandering the Judean desert. What could be more natural than to want more of that?

Jesus never claims that the bread they ate was anything but good. Taking care of physical hunger was and is a good thing. There is a larger good to discover. It was also good that they shared with each other; good that they gave thanks for the bread and fish; good that they were not wasteful with whatever was left.

They are right on the edge of a new understanding. Whatever created the abundance of leftover bread did not create bread that will last forever. The same natural processes that cause fermentation will still stimulate decay. Even in miraculous bread.

The people begin to see something else and they are still curious – still in a cloud of unknowing, even as it is clearing. “What may we do so that we may perform the labor of God?” they ask. They want to know how to *please* God.

Again, like a masterful teacher, Jesus gives them something more to ruminate on: “This is the labor of God, that you have faith in him whom that one sent.”

Once again, our English translation can’t capture the cultural nuance of the language. Jesus is saying “to truly please God, believe *into*, *embed* yourself, *abide in* the Anointed.” Far more than granting their intellectual agreement, Jesus is telling them to give their entire

selves and be in total solidarity with the embodied reality of God's love.

Having seen a glimpse of the source that will satisfy their spiritual hunger, the people ask for a sign that Jesus is working in coordination with God. They seem to recognize evidence of Divine involvement, and they are still unsettled as to what and who Jesus is. So they ask Jesus to authenticate himself. If he's not a prophet and he is more than a mere teacher, surely Jesus can give them some validation from God. Like Moses did.

Now, either they have forgotten the sign of the bread that they ate yesterday or they are, in fact, asking for the same substance that helped their ancestors survive during the exile in the wilderness.

Each morning, the Israelites gathered a sweet, flaky gum from the desert floor that they made into bread, but it had to be eaten that day or it would melt away. Even French bakers know that life-giving bread does not last more than a day. The resin in the desert was a gift from God that the people called "manna," a word that means something close to "what is it?" It was meant to stress reliance on God, not Moses.

The people now see the possibility that Jesus is talking about a gift from God. And so for a third time, Jesus ever so gently refocuses their thinking: "Moses has not given you the bread from heaven, but rather my Father gives you the true bread from heaven; for the bread of God is the one descending out of heaven and imparting life to the kosmos."

Well, this just blows their hearts and minds wide open. The momentary realization causes them to respond a great deal like Photina, the Samaritan woman at the well: "Sir, give us this bread always."

And just as he said to the disciples in the reading we heard last week, Jesus answers to all the people with the words that God spoke to Moses: "I am," he says, "I am the bread of life."

The immensity of that revelation still comes to us and slips away like waves washing up a beach. We catch tastes of it, whiffs of it in the air and then it fades as we struggle to understand. That's a natural dynamic of our relationship with God, who wants more for us than just to know *about* God. God wants us to *be* each other.

John's Jesus offers the unifying truth that he is, the life-affirming resurrection that he is. And we can find our way to the wellspring, the source, of that truth and resurrection life, right here in our own bodies. "Whoever comes to me does not hunger and whoever has faith in me does not thirst – forever."

In a letter to his godson, theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote: "Faith isn't the determined stance in the face of negative evidence to 'believe that God exists.' Faith is the acknowledgement that the God who called Abraham out of his home can be trusted to be true to the promises he made. In that respect, faith is more like expectation."

Whether we understand or not, what God asks is that we trust and give ourselves to God, the Giver of life. In return, we can expect to see signs of God, the Bread of life, who promises us grace for, as Paul said, "building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

---

Works cited or consulted:

- Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godson*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.
- Lewis, Karoline M. *John*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.
- Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Shea, John. *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004.