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Psalm 23; John 6:1-21

## SATISFACTION

If you joined us for worship last week, you may be having a feeling of déjà vu. You may be thinking to yourself, “didn’t we read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm last week? And didn’t we also hear the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000?” The answer to both is yes. Last week we read the story of the feeding of the 5,000 from Mark’s gospel. This week the lectionary gives us the same story from John’s gospel. Last week we looked at the connection between Mark’s feeding story and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. And this week we’re going to stick again with Psalm 23 because this rich text is well worth exploring in greater depth and it again helps inform the New Testament passage for this week.

John’s version of the feeding story is similar to Mark’s but with a few new details. A large crowd follows Jesus. Jesus asks the disciples a test question: How are they going to feed all these people? Philip remarks that 6 months’ wages wouldn’t be enough to feed them all. Then Andrew makes what seems to be a crazy observation: that there is a boy who has five barely loaves and two fish. But Andrew admits that such provisions are woefully inadequate for the size of the crowd. Jesus then has everyone sit down on the grass and after giving thanks, he distributes the bread and the fish to the 5,000 people. The gospel writer of John tells us that people ate as much as they wanted. And then John writes that “when they were satisfied,” Jesus instructed his disciples to gather up the fragments, and there was so much left over that the remnants filled twelve baskets.

Like Mark's account of this same story, there is an underlying message of abundance. There is also the possible message of generosity. Did the small boy's offering of food inspire others to share what they had brought? The gospel writer John also adds another small but interesting detail in this story when he writes that the crowds ate until they were *satisfied*. Satisfied. Mark's account of this story states that the people ate until they were filled. But John's version tells us the people ate and were satisfied. Satisfied is different than being full.

Can you recall when the last time was you were satisfied, really satisfied? Satisfaction implies a mental and emotional state of wellbeing, not simply a physical condition. We often confuse the concept of satisfaction with the idea of happiness but the two are not the same. When asked what we want from our lives or what we want for our children, many people will respond that we want to be happy. But happiness is such a temporary and fleeting emotion. Happiness is possible as long as we are healthy, and our lives are in order, and our children are doing well, and our relationships are without strain, and our economic situation is abundant. We might know happiness at the birth of our child or upon the celebration of a significant event or upon receiving a special award. But wait five minutes and that moment of happiness evaporates. When the baby is squalling at 2 in the morning we are not likely to feel a lot of happiness.

I think we confuse happiness with satisfaction. Satisfaction is a state of contentment. Maybe it seems like splitting hairs to differentiate happiness and satisfaction because we live in a society that regards both as pretty much the same thing, and teaches us that both are based on external circumstances. But the Bible does not teach us that our lives are about finding happiness. It does, however, invite us to seek and to know satisfaction.

But what will bring us satisfaction? This is an important question to ask ourselves. What will bring you satisfaction? What will bring me satisfaction? Society stands ready to give us a

whole lot of answers to that question. Advertisers will encourage us to find satisfaction in their products. Social messages tell us that we will know satisfaction through having a well-paying job, or by becoming a homeowner, or through marriage or having children. But we know people--maybe even ourselves--who have good incomes, who own their own home, who are married and have kids, and who are nevertheless dissatisfied with their lives. And when we really break it down, the message we get from advertisers that we can find meaningful satisfaction in life from a soft-drink or cell phone we buy is ridiculous.

So what will bring us satisfaction?

Psalm 23 offers us a rather radical perspective on the notion of satisfaction. Psalm 23 is really a profound expression of satisfaction offered, not when life is good and everything is going our way, but offered by the writer while in the midst of great hardship. We can easily forget that behind all the beautiful images in this psalm—the talk of shepherds and green pastures and cups overflowing—behind these lovely images is the specter of death and hardship and suffering. The writer of this psalm speaks about walking through a dark valley—or as sometimes translated, the valley of the shadow of death. When the writer states, “I fear no evil,” it is because evil is indeed a real presence in his or her life. When the writer speaks about finding comfort in God’s rod and staff, the writer is affirming that God has the weapons of protection to ward off danger. The psalmist openly speaks about enemies encircling the table God has prepared. Hardship and danger and death are present realities in this psalm.

But in the midst of this dark reality, when life is especially hard, the writer affirms a state of contentment, a state of satisfaction. And this affirmation begins in the very first sentence when the psalmist states, “The Lord is my shepherd, *I shall not want.*” I shall not want. Not wanting is the very essence of satisfaction.

Can you imagine life free from wanting? It is difficult to picture. Our cultural habits and values and celebrations are based on wanting. It is a message preached to us daily, hourly by the commercials on TV, the ads in magazines, the catalogs that clog our mailboxes. Our holidays are centered around wanting. Our economy is based on wanting. Birthdays and weddings all incorporate wanting. Wanting is as natural a part of our lives as breathing. And yet, we are never satisfied. We want and then get, and then still want more. Acquiring a new car does not stop us from wanting the next interesting one to come off the assembly line. Achieving financial security does not stop us from wanting still yet more money. Career successes and personal triumphs do not keep us from wanting still more accolades. Wanting is everywhere. Wanting is considered normal. Wanting is regarded as good.

And so, it is a very bold and daring proposition to renounce wanting. “I shall not want,” the Psalm says. The writer does not want because the writer has found satisfaction in something greater than a bank account or a job or a clean bill of health. The writer has found satisfaction in the presence of the shepherd.

The early Christians who read this ancient psalm regarded Jesus as that good shepherd—the one to whom they would commit themselves, the one who they would trust, the one who would care for them and provide for their well-being, the one who would see them through dark valleys. It was this good shepherd who offered them salvation—not through false assurances of health and wealth and a problem-free life--but through the gift of God’s love and the call to live a special way in this world. And these early Christians found satisfaction in orienting their lives around this assurance of God’s presence and God’s call.

The pandemic has been an extremely disorienting time for our society. And some people have used this time of disorientation to reassess their lives. They are reconsidering their

lifestyles, their choices, their careers, their priorities. Where to do they want to live? How do they want to live? Some are using this disorienting time to reorient their lives around priorities that yield greater satisfaction.

The ugly truth is that all the while we are wanting more and more and never being satisfied, there are those around us, in our own communities and in our world, who truly want for life's basic necessities. And meanwhile, the rest of us who have more than we need just can't get enough to be satisfied. We keep searching for that thing--that material item, that new job, that new relationship, that new situation--which will fulfill us.

The feeding of the 5,000 story in John makes it clear that Jesus desires for us to know satisfaction. Being full is not sufficient. Our houses are full. Our schedules are full. But fullness does not necessarily mean satisfaction. Jesus desires for us to know satisfaction. He offers us a way to know satisfaction even as we walk through all of life's disorienting moments—a satisfaction that comes when we orient our lives around the goodness and mercy of God.