

Encountering the Bread of Life

John 6:24-35

The opening scene of our scripture today paints a picture of Jesus as a kind of celebrity. The crowds are clamouring after him, to the point where, when they can't find him, they jump into boats and head to Capernaum in search of him. They are a bit like a hoard of crazed fans with a collective objective: find Jesus and see if he'll do another one of his bread miracles.

It's helpful to remember that, previous to this, the crowd, having seen Jesus' healing miracles, decided to follow Jesus out to a fairly remote location along the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus fed them all—all 5000 plus. And upon being fed and recognizing this incredible feat, the crowd wanted Jesus as their king, even if it took force. And Jesus, knowing this, slipped away.

But the crowd is determined, and so now here they are, trailing Jesus and asking him when it was he got to the other side of the lake. They're interested in knowing his every move—they don't want to miss out on more bread, or more healing, or a refreshing drink. And Jesus is aware of this, not for the sake of his own safety, in the way that we might see celebrities today moving from place to place with a bodyguard or two to keep the mob at bay, but because he is aware of what their hearts are seeking: more bread. They have been wowed by his miracles and they want more food. In fact, Jesus addresses the crowd saying, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." (John 6:26)

The trouble is that this crowd doesn't get it. They don't understand what Jesus is really offering. It's not about feeding people just for today. It's not about becoming their earthly king who is able to whip up loaves of fresh bread that will appear at their doorsteps every morning—though they think this may be the case based on the story of their ancestors receiving manna each morning in the wilderness. Jesus speaks further saying "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." (John 6:27).

Food that endures for eternal life sounds wonderful. Aware of the feeling of an empty stomach, the crowd is likely salivating at this thought: food forever. But, again, the crowd doesn't really get it. They ask Jesus "What should we be doing in order to work

the works of God?” (John 6:28) You see, the Jewish people who made up this crowd believed that what God required was good deeds, virtuous acts, and pious works. And if they did the works that God required, then they would be rewarded; they would receive blessings in return. And if they didn’t, they could be punished. Their understanding of faith and righteousness, or justice, was performance based. They did good works because, for them, you reap what you sow. For them, righteousness can be seen as an accomplishment, and faith as a worthy achievement. And so, if that feeling of physical hunger and emptiness could disappear, then they will do whatever works it takes to please God to obtain that.

While what Jesus is offering will fill the emptiness that people feel, it won’t fill it in the way they expect or believe. The crowd is deficient in vision. Jesus responds to their question about “works” by saying that “the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:29). The crowd lacks “faith,” which in this context surely means that they need faith in the one whom God has sent, the Word made flesh. Unfortunately, their faith is in their *idea* of a Saviour—a Saviour who they imagine can provide them with miraculous food and water whenever they need it.

What Jesus presents to them is something that, not so surprisingly, flips the idea of “works” and “deeds” on its head. He challenges this understanding by saying that the work God requires of us is to have faith in God, to have faith in Jesus, the one whom God has authorized and sent to save and redeem the world. It is faith in Jesus that brings eternal life, that can feed a crowd for eternity. But does the crowd really want to encounter the Jesus who is eternal life? Or will they choose to stay satisfied with encountering the Jesus who can feed them for today?

There is wisdom in what Jesus is saying but do we understand it, even today? Can we claim, over 2000 years later, that we get what Jesus is saying any more than the crowd back then did? We live in a world now where we leave little space for ambiguity. We want clarity. We want to soundly comprehend it all. But what is the wisdom we are drawing from? Is it Christ? Or is it something else? How can we encounter faith in Jesus—the bread of life? How can we come to “get it” through more than just hard facts?

One of the problems we are confronted with is the conventional wisdom of our time. This is the mainstream wisdom that everybody knows. It’s our broad understanding of what is real and how to live. It encompasses everything from table manners to images of the good life. It isn’t something that you study—its something you automatically

engage in as you grow up within your given culture. In our Western world, it is often based on rewards and punishments. It's the idea that "the righteous will prosper," or in its more secular form, "work hard and you will succeed." It's hard to see and understand Jesus' kind of wisdom when it is so subversive compared to the everyday, conventional wisdom we are steeped in. Conventional wisdom elevates a transactional way of living: I do something for you or give something to you and you do or give something in return. And it isn't found only within the secular realm; with conventional wisdom God becomes someone we must satisfy, whose requirements we must meet.

But Jesus reveals an alternative wisdom in his dialogue with the crowd. It is a promise: you will *never* be hungry again. You will *never* be thirsty again. For those of us who understand or can imagine what it is like to be without faith, without hope, without love, this promise says a great deal. Which may be why those who've endured greater hardships and suffering are often more ready to jump on board. This promise asks us to draw close to Jesus, even if we're unsure, and feed until that emptiness inside, that can often be stoked by conventional wisdom, is filled to overflowing. Jesus promises that we won't need to find other entertainments to fill the emptiness; we won't need the latest and greatest gadgets to substitute for our yearnings; we won't need to give into the fact that, as William Willimon puts it, "our culture is a vast supermarket of desire." We need desire only one thing: the Son of Man from whom we may eat and not die but live forever. This promise has the power to fill our emptiness, and we need only believe. And here is the main question that confronts us and that confronted the crowds all those years ago: Will you believe? Will you encounter Christ on the journey and open yourself to transformation? Will you accept this gift of faith?

Because it is a gift, this faith that Jesus presents to the crowd. Jesus offers everyone the bread of life. Everyone has the opportunity to be fed, they just have to take the time to understand what that really means, to be transformed by the gift of faith in Christ and to slowly come to an understanding that it's not works alone that bring us salvation, it's God's grace. Yes, it is the narrower path for the crowd to consider, but this alternative wisdom, alternative vision, leads to life. It is dying to old ways and renewing ourselves—satiating a hunger—through light and love and compassion.

To encounter someone implies an unexpected meeting or a confrontation or even unpleasant struggle. Encounter and comprehension of the Word made flesh takes time, humility about what we can and cannot know, and a worshipful willingness to be taught by a Saviour who presents an alternative wisdom and vision. Many in that crowd were not ready for an encounter with Jesus—not ready for that struggle. They were not

ready to deepen their faith, to transform their understanding of what Jesus as bread really means.

Many will feel the same way today, unwilling or not prepared to accept the gift of bread that Jesus offers. It's not always an easy thing to "get." This is because it isn't a bread that can be eaten and instantly change us. It isn't a 30 day diet that guarantees results. This doesn't happen all at once. Rather, it's a transformative journey. This may be why so many were still confused when Jesus said "I am the bread of life." Even if we "get it" on a surface level, it's not something you can fully understand until you begin to live into it. We don't immediately transform after hearing a great speaker say something amazing and life changing. Even if it's positive, we don't change until we apply what we've heard to our lives each day. It takes prayer, asking God to move love more deeply into our hearts, to open our hearts to receive, so that we can begin to perceive the world in new and eye-opening and life-giving family-of-God ways. It is life in the Spirit. It is seeing God not as an enforcer of requirements and limitations and boundaries, but as compassionate, just, and driven by love.

Through Christ, we know that God wants us to be fed spiritually. Through Christ, we know that God wants us to be light—to not be stuck in darkness, hopelessness, and feeling empty. Through Christ, we know that God offers resurrection and life. Even in this world we are not trapped in physical, mental, emotional or spiritual death; there are always opportunities for new life. And these revelations can help us to not just read the words on the page, but to grapple with this gift of faith that is held out to us. These revelations challenge us to consider if we are a part of the single-minded crowd, or if we are ready to eat our fill of life eternal. These revelations encourage us to keep asking questions. Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to alleviate our emptiness. Can it be that faith means more than just clarity of the facts, but rather, an encounter with a person, one who is "the way, the truth, and the life"? Might it be true that Christ is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek? Is it true that God has come to us, miraculously with us, before us, like manna that is miraculously dropped into our wilderness? Keep looking around. Keep listening carefully. Prepare to encounter an alternative wisdom. Keep asking questions. The answers may be in your next taste of bread.