

## What *Is* Bread to Life?

Rohnert Park – St. John's UMC

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There was once a lady who scrimped and saved for years in order to take an ocean cruise. At long last, she had saved enough money to pay for her ticket. However, there was not much money left for luxuries. She nevertheless decided to go. “For I will take along a large supply of cheese and cracker biscuits,” she thought, “and eat them in my cabin. That way it won't cost as much.”

This is just what she did. She took control, went on the cruise and had a fine time. At mealtimes, when the other passengers went to the dining room, she went to her cabin and ate cheese and crackers. She consoled herself with the knowledge that she had saved just enough money for one fine dinner. On her last night aboard she was going to splurge and have a gourmet meal!

The last night arrived, and she dressed in her best clothes. Finally, she was to eat with the other passengers in the dining room. With great anticipation, she ordered the most delicious meal. “Oh,” she thought, “the sacrifice was worthwhile.”

At the end of the meal, she called the waiter and asked for her bill. The waiter looked at her in great surprise. “Madam,” he said, “didn't you know that all of your meals were included in the price of your ticket?”

This story, from Charles Arcodia's Stories for Sharing, (page 3) illustrates, for me, exactly what is happening, or not happening, in the scripture reading for today: The need to control, lots of misunderstanding, and confusion.

The scripture continues what last week's scripture began.

The scene? A beach on the Sea of Galilee.

The players? A crowd of the people who had, the day before, been fed with what seemed a meager amount of barley bread and fish... had been fed enough so that **all** of them, 5000 men and at least as many women and children, were [in my translation] “all full,” in Spanish it translates “were all satisfied.” And then, the disciples had been able to gather up another 12 basketsful of leftovers. But did the people know what had happened? Did they know from where the food had come? Did they recognize the miracle that was **in** the bread? I think not...

Now it is the next day. Some of the people, a lot of them, actually, had not been able to find where Jesus had gone. They got into some boats and went to Capernaum, looking for Jesus. They found him. “Teacher, when did you get here?” begins a dialog between Jesus and the crowd that is, in essence, the scripture for today... Question... Response... Question... Response... And confusion.

The thing is, in the gospel of John, confusion almost always points to something else that is going on... And so it is here. With each point of the crowd's confusion, Jesus gets the chance to redirect them to something that is more important.

First, the crowd wants to know how Jesus and the disciples got around the shore. Jesus accuses them of just wanting to eat again when they should be working for imperishable food... The spiritual reality of what happened is more important than the earthly one.

Then they want to know what kind of work they should be doing that would be pleasing to God. When told to trust in God, they ask for a sign like the one Moses gave the people in the wilderness. Jesus reminds them that it was God, not Moses, who gave the manna in the wilderness.

Then, they ask Jesus for the bread that matters and Jesus replies that he is the Bread of Life, that those who come to him will never ever get hungry again and that whoever trusts him will never ever get thirsty again.

Oh my... aren't they just like all of us? Last week we talked about putting our faith in a God who loves us no matter what... and what it means to rely on bread that sustains us for more than a day; how following Jesus helps us help God to set a table where everyone is satisfied, both those inside and outside the church.

To do so, we have to believe in things "unseen." But, being human, putting our faith in a God that no one has ever seen, is difficult. I think the challenge of believing things "unseen" is why we put so much faith in the things we CAN see, things we can see and touch. Things like career, finances, family, relationships, cheese and cracker biscuits for days on end, merely reinforce our confusion and our faith in our own ability to control our lives. Unfortunately, life has a way of reminding us that our faith in those things may not be rewarded in the way we expect.

I think Jesus was disappointed that the people in the crowd were more interested in bread than in God's cause of peace and justice and freedom for all, those things he had been teaching them. I also think that Jesus knew the dangers of a faith that is based on tangible results.

Perhaps that is why Jesus was so harsh with them. He was aware that they weren't looking for the new life of God's peace and justice and freedom. They weren't following him because they believed he was bringing them this new life. They were following him because they were looking for some kind of visible confirmation so they could believe.

Jesus called them to a completely different kind of faith. He called them to "Throw [their] lot in with the One that God has sent" (Jn. 6:29 MSG). That means throwing their lot in with God's cause.

It's the same kind of the faith that the three young men displayed when they confronted King Nebuchadnezzar and refused to worship his statue. In

effect, they said to him, “Our God is able rescue us from the fiery furnace, but even if he doesn’t we will not worship you” (Daniel 3:17-18).

It’s the same kind of faith that Abraham and Sarah had when they set out on a journey without even knowing where they were going. Stories of that kind of faith are told throughout the Bible. They had to be. They have to be; because it’s impossible to wrap your hands around that kind of faith and get a firm grip on it. No wonder most of us prefer to place our faith in something concrete, something we can see and touch, something we think we can control. But at the end of the day, all those seemingly reliable objects of our faith fall short. They all let us down. And we really shouldn’t be surprised at that; because those “perishable things” in which we put so much of our faith, simply lack the ability to satisfy our deepest need. What we need is the life that which only God can provide.

I think Jesus knew that we all have a tendency to put our faith in things that ultimately cannot satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. St. Augustine said it this way, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in [God].” The only “bread” that can truly satisfy our hunger is the life that God offers us. And the amazing truth is that when we take the risk of “throwing in our lot with the one whom God sent” to carry out God’s cause in the world, we find that somehow we experience a peace, a freedom, a quality of life that none of those “perishable things” can possibly provide. When we take the risk of faith and begin to quiet our restless hearts, we find the life God offers us truly satisfies us in ways we may never have expected. And that, my brothers and sisters, is exactly what “bread” *is* to life... A faith that brings peace and justice and freedom for everyone. Alleluia! Amen.