

“Bread of Life”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
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John 6: 24-35

Why are you here today? What leads you to get up on a day when you could be resting at home or doing a fun activity somewhere, and instead come to worship? Did you come of your own free will, or did someone say, “We are going to church today”? Are you here because you are hurting and in need of comfort? Are you here because you are grateful and you wish to express your thanks? Are you here because it looks good on your personal, internal resume? What is your motivation for coming to church today?

We all have different answers to those questions. Many times, how we answer those questions changes over the course of our lifetime, depending on what is happening at that particular stage of life. We can all confess that sometimes, our motivations have been self-serving, to be sure - yes, even your own pastor will admit that he did not always want to go to church when he was a teenager, and my father was the minister. Often, our motivation for being active in the community of faith is directly tied to what spiritually nourishes and sustains us.

Benjamin Sparks writes: There was a name in nineteenth-century China for persons who came to church because they were hungry for material food. They converted, were baptized, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their prospects improved and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Hence missionaries called them “rice Christians.”

The crowds that followed Jesus to Capernaum to find him after he fed the five thousand in the wilderness are like those who see faith and church membership instrumentally, as something they can choose for themselves to use for their own needs or to pursue their own interests. Christians like the rice Christians of the nineteenth century are not a new problem, but are as old as the gospel itself (Benjamin Sparks, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 308-310).

In this story from John’s gospel, the crowds were plentiful and eager to find Jesus after the events that preceded this passage. Chapter 6 begins with Jesus feeding five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish. It is John’s account of this miracle story, and it causes people to respond with passion and expectation that Jesus would be their king (6:15-16). That crazed passion causes Jesus to flee to the mountains, and later to come to his disciples by walking on the water to their boat on the sea (6:16-21). It is on the heels of these two

miraculous acts of Jesus that our story comes, and it makes palpable the frenzy the people felt toward “this prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14).

When the crowds find Jesus, he addresses their fervor with some reality: “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” (6:26-27). The people saw in Jesus a performer – one who showed them signs – and they wanted more of the same: “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” The crowds experienced the feeding of the five thousand not as a spiritual feeding by God, but as a magic act which shook them from their stupor. Now, they are searching for more of the same.

Yet that is not what Jesus has to offer them, and he does not answer their question. Brian Stoffregen writes: “The question Jesus answers is: ‘Why are you, namely, the crowd, here?’ His answer to that unspoken question is: ‘You are seeking me not because you saw signs, but because you ate from the bread and were filled.’ The use of the present tense for ‘seek’ implies that the crowd is still seeking. A probable implication is that as long as their motives are centered in their bellies, they will never really discover Jesus” (www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x24.html).

Jesus is introducing the people to new lenses through which they can view their world and their lives. The people saw Jesus’ act only on the surface – what alleviated their immediate, physical hunger and thirst. He wants them to see what underlies that miraculous act: “it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven” (6:32). It is because of God’s love for creation that he sent his Son into this world. It was not to perform magic and to stir amazement and wonder on the surface of our lives. It was to stir in the core of our being a deep sense of gratitude and yearning to feed on God’s love in Jesus Christ.

That is why, when the people ask for this food, Jesus responds, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (6:35). That is what the signs of walking on water and feeding the five thousand pointed to: the bread of heaven. They were not in and of themselves what the people were to feed on. They were signs that pointed to God, which led the people to seek and find God. It can be easy to feed off the signs, but that will not feed the spiritual hunger you possess. That hunger will only be filled by Jesus himself, the true bread of life.

Sparks continues: Too often, we forget how to pursue what really matters. We are accustomed to inviting people into the community of faith for all the wrong reasons: for the “right” kind of worship; for political engagement on behalf of the poor and downtrodden; for the sake of a Christian America; for a strong youth and family ministry; for

the opportunity to practice mission in a downtown location. Yet what we have to offer – in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ – first and foremost is “soul food,” which lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world. It is soul food that we desire, and soul food in which we will rejoice, long after our bellies are full of rice.

We North American Christians have preached a broken, truncated gospel. We have been good marketers rather than true witnesses. We have bought into a culture that rewards consumers and addresses their needs, instead of proclaiming a gospel that offers us faith in the only begotten Son, who gave his life for the sins of the world – and who is lifted up so that all who believe in him have everlasting life. He is the bread of life. Those who come to him will never be hungry, and those who put their trust in him will never thirst (ibid).

And so, we come this morning to this table, to receive the sacrament that Christ instituted on our behalf. This is a time when we affirm that God feeds us continually with the bread of life. Our denomination’s Book of Order states that: “Christ himself is the host at his table . . . and that Christ himself is fully present and received in the Supper” (Book of Order, PCUSA, Appendix C-4). In other words, Christ has invited us today to this feast, so that our souls might be filled, not just our bellies. Christ is our host today, not just the one who performs miraculous acts which amaze us. Christ is the source of our thanksgiving today, for it is through him that God has given us new life.

May our thanksgiving and gratitude be offered to the bread of life, who nourishes not just our bellies, but most importantly our souls.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.