

Sermon

Proper 13B 2024 August 4, 2024

John 6:24-35

Today we have the second of five passages from John in the Bread of Life discourse. Last week we heard John's version of the Feeding of the 5000 and how the disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers. A few ways to think about that story is, obviously, to see Jesus as the bread of life who feeds all who are gathered. Another way is to see the Church in the role of the disciples and that we are in the business, or should be in the business, of gathering up those whom society labels unwanted and leftover. In both the feeding and the gathering, the Church provides a place of nourishment and safety.

In the Gospel of John we are always being challenged to see things in a new way: Seeing Jesus from a cosmological point of view, being born from above, seeing with compassion when someone is caught in sin, learning a new commandment, and seeing resurrection with new eyes. But no matter how often we are challenged to see and live in new ways, we always seem to want to fall back into the old ways of what we have always done and known.

Jesus offers a new way of thinking when he says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." The people, not quite following where Jesus is going with this, fall back into what they've always known: "Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven to eat; what are you going to give us?"

The people had seen signs and received bread, and now they wanted more – more food, more signs, more of what they thought would benefit them in the here and now. As Saint Augustine says about this passage, "How many seek Jesus for no other objective than to get some kind of temporal benefit?" He then goes on to list a variety of situations in his day in which people flock to the Church eager to have Jesus solve their problem.

It would be easy for me to stand up here and tell you all to spend all your time working for the food that endures for eternal life. It would be easy for me to say, "Pray seven times a day, attend Wednesday morning Mass, attend Sunday Mass, give away all but the absolute essentials, read all 150 Psalms every week, read other books of the Bible regularly, and tithe to the Church because all this, and more, is what the

holy fathers and mothers of ancient times did.” That would be an easy way for me to tell you how you should be working for eternal food.

But as my New Testament professor often said, “It’s more complicated than that.”

It’s complicated because, while Jesus is telling us not to work for the food that perishes, we all need to eat. We all have basic needs that must be met. As the saying goes, “It’s hard to philosophize on an empty stomach.” And yet, in working for our basic needs we must not forget the place of our spiritual needs. How might we do this? I’m so glad you asked.

First, evaluate your priorities. How important is God, faith, and Church in your life? Is that importance reflected in your pledge and your attendance? In your personal budget, is the first line item to the Church, or are your donations done as an afterthought or from what’s left over? Has your pledge kept pace with any financial increases you have received, or are you still pledging what you did 10, 20, or 30 years ago? Do you participate in Bible studies or other spiritual learning opportunities that are offered? Do you attend church when traveling? These are questions only you can answer about priorities. I ask because Jesus asks: What are your real priorities?

Second, how is your life a blessing to others? Can you help at the food pantry? If you can’t physically help, are you donating food or funds to them? We have collection boxes in the narthex for food that could certainly be less empty every Sunday. Do you have clothes or coats not worn that could be donated to those in need? When was the last time you invited someone to church? In your public life, do your words and actions help or hurt people?

What it all comes down to is this: Love God and love your neighbor. Love God by making him a real priority in your life. Prioritize that love of God through your time, talent, and treasure.

Love your neighbor through your actions and words. As James points out, telling someone you’ll pray for their needs while not helping to actually provide for them doesn’t do any good. Prioritize your love of neighbor through acts of kindness, justice, and mercy.

We all need food, clothing, and shelter. But once we have what we need, how much more do we really need? How much is too much?

In addition to those basic needs, we also need to be other-directed. As an example, I once heard that the Dead Sea is dead because all it does is take in, it never releases what it receives. Consequently, all that intake, all that focus on self, causes it to become stagnant and dead. If all we do is take in, we also will die; if not physically, then certainly spiritually.

Jesus reminds us that he is the bread of life. When we eat of his body we take on his attributes of being other-directed. We learn to focus on God and neighbor. We are not only fed by Christ, but we also learn to gather up pieces to feed and shelter others.

Part of the Collect for last Sunday reflects all of this when it says: Grant that we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal.

Jesus is the bread of life. May we not only be fed and nourished, but may we live in a way that helps feed and nourish others as well, because it will be in these acts that we will never hunger and never thirst.

Amen.