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The Life of Bread and the Bread of Life
John 6: 22-35

Jesus was having a crowd problem. He was like celebrities in our day who have difficulty finding privacy. In his case, people sought him out because of his miracles and unique teachings. Occasionally though he felt a need to get away from people for some much needed rest. That was not an easy thing for him to do and in our Gospel lesson for today in John's Gospel we find him desperately but unsuccessfully seeking privacy. At one point he did get a few minutes alone with his disciples but the people found him and he ended up feeding five thousand people. He again tried to get away but by then his celebrity status was even stronger and despite his best efforts to find privacy, the people were not to be denied and they found him again.

In our lesson for today we read that when they found him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus didn't answer their question. Instead he confronted them with their reasons for seeking him. "Very truly," he said to them, "I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

How perceptive Jesus was. They wanted him because they saw in him someone who could meet their basic physical and economic needs, and that was clearly understandable in the light of the poor physical and economic conditions of that day. History is quite clear. People will follow the person who can meet their basic economic needs and desires. Witness Adolph Hitler in the aftermath of World War I and the depression of the 30's. The German economy was in shambles and he came to power on the promise of providing bread. In our own country at the same time Franklin D. Roosevelt swept into office because the people believed that Hoover had failed and that Roosevelt could bring the nation out of the depression. The last two presidential elections occurred in the midst of a devastating recession and the major issue was which candidate could jump start the economy and bring on new much needed jobs. Though we are not in

a recession now the economy will be a major issue in our next election. People will always follow leaders that they believe can meet their basic economic needs and desires.

Jesus suspected that the people sought him out to get food for their stomachs and said so, but then he gave them a sobering admonition: “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.”

Now, that is an interesting statement because it refers to the two kinds of bread or food that we need to survive and puts them into their proper priority. Someone has distinguished the two kinds of bread by observing that there is the kind we live on and the kind we live by. There is a bread which stands for all of life’s physical necessities. Some people in fact use the word bread as slang for money. When someone says of her job, “Well, it’s not much but it keeps bread on the table,” she means more than whole wheat or white bread. She means all those things that are necessary to sustain life.

Jesus knew and we all know that we do need food, clothing, shelter and the like to sustain life and our Christian faith rightly promotes and works for an adequate supply of those necessities for all people. Our faith is not one to frown on physical and material goods. Indeed, we affirm them as good gifts from God for our strengthening, enjoyment and well-being.

When Jesus said in our lesson, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life” he was not literally calling for us to quit our jobs and to concentrate on personal spiritual development. Rather, he was well aware of the reality of life, namely, that there is a tendency for us to be so wrapped up in the pursuit of material things that we lose sight of other, pressing needs. He was recognizing that material things are necessary for us to exist, but that they cannot give us life. We need material things to sustain our life, but they cannot provide us with an adequate reason or purpose for life.

The prophet Mohammed is not often quoted from Christian pulpits but on one occasion he once wisely said, “If thou hast two loaves, sell one and buy lilies.” He was saying that we need more than bread to be satisfied. We need beauty, and by implication, other gifts of the spirit if we are to live.

We need the bread that we live on to sustain our life. And, there is no doubt but that that kind of bread can bring joy and pleasure to our lives, but it stops short in being

able to give us the deepest meaning and purpose for living. And that is where the other kind of bread comes in, the bread we live by. Concerning this bread, someone has said, “It doesn’t keep your body going; it keeps you going. Without the first kind you cannot exist. Without the other kind you can exist but you cannot live. This is the Bread of Life, and Jesus said, ‘I am the Bread of Life.’”

When Jesus challenged the human tendency to pursue material things and began to contend that he was the one who could provide nourishment for our life, the people began to question his authenticity. They knew that he had succeeded in feeding those 5000 people and they also knew that Moses had miraculously provided manna, or a form of bread, for their ancestors during the exodus. What made him greater than Moses? they wanted to know. Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses that gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And when they asked him to give them that bread, he said, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Clearly Jesus was contending here that it is God who gives us what we need not just to exist but to live. It was God who gave Moses the manna to feed the people of Israel during the exodus and it is God who has sent Jesus to give all people the spiritual nourishment that also can provide us with meaning in life.

There is a progression of thought here. We need bread to live on, to exist, but we need more than bread to live. We need other people. We need memories. We need symbols. We need beauty and truth and art. But even those are imperfect and inadequate. We need, therefore the life and presence of God himself and the good news of the Christian Gospel is that God has come to us in a live flesh and blood human being, Jesus, who is called the Christ.

Those who turn to him in faith inevitably find that he gives a profound new meaning and purpose to life. They find, for example, that he is convincing evidence not only that there is a God but that he is a God of love who cares deeply for all human beings. This is in contrast to those who do not believe in God and who believe that things happen by some blind impersonal fate, or if there is a God, he is not necessarily a God of

love and therefore is not a God who can be trusted. Jesus reveals a God who is love in all his being and who can be trusted. Further, believers in Jesus know that he not only lived and taught a way of living and being that is challenging, but a way that works. His way of living and being is in keeping with the heartbeat of the universe and if we follow his way of living, loving and giving we function smoothly. Believers in Jesus also find that he opens up a relationship with God that is eternal. Indeed, they find that nothing in life or death can ever separate us from his love.

I suggest to you that there is no other person or philosophy in the world who can give you all that. I cannot prove it to you. I can only urge you to try him and see for yourself. I can say to you that all who have tried him have never been disappointed.

As I see it, it is not a matter of choosing between the bread we live on and the bread that we live by. It is a matter of perspective and priority. We have to be involved in the life of bread to exist but we will be disappointed if we mistake that for the bread of life. Jesus is the Bread of Life, and he offers us a relationship with God and others and a way of living and being that can satisfy the deepest hunger of the human heart.

In just a moment we will gather at this table to receive the bread that we live by. As you take bread and wine into your body, I pray that you will open your heart to the one who is the Bread of Life. You will find that he can satisfy your deepest hunger and thirst.

Eternal God, on this early June day when we try to escape the summer heat, we come to this place to experience the warmth of your love. As we worship you we give you thanks for all your good gifts to us, especially the gift of your Son, Jesus and the redemption that he has brought us in his life, death and resurrection.

We are living in tumultuous times. It seems that more than ever we are seeing turmoil in the middle east, the far east, in Africa and in many areas of our own country. Conflict is raging ^{between} ~~within~~ religions and races and nations and more and more our lives are dominated by fear. We pray for your healing presence to come to all the world's leaders and people and teach us to live together in peace and harmony and generosity.

We offer our prayers today for all suffering people, especially the sick, the lonely, the depressed and despondent, the poor and homeless, the victims of crime, violence and war. Let the loving Spirit of Jesus, we pray, bring comfort and healing to all your suffering people.

We continue to offer prayers for this congregation and especially for those who are actively seeking a new pastor. Guide them in their process and decisions to that person that you have in mind for this church, we pray.

This prayer we lift to you in the loving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray together, saying

The proof of God's amazing love is this: While we were sinners Christ died for us.
Because we have faith in him, we dare to approach God with confidence.
In faith and penitence, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

Hear the good news!

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good.

I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Amen.

Go forth with steady step
As you face the days ahead.
Live, certain that in many ways,
God provides faith for darkened hours,
Courage in despairing nights,
And calm in depressing circumstances.

Revel in your joys.
Recall your blessings,
Walk in the Light.

So live, that if among days it were your last,
It would represent
 in living, your finest,
 in loving, your Savior,
 in dying, a final benediction of noble character,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From *Prayers For Worship*, by E. Lee Phillips