

“Wonder Bread?”

Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6: 24-35

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It is easy to assume that today’s gospel lesson is about bread and hunger and feeding hungry people. We tend to make the same mistake the people made with Jesus. We get caught up in the miracle, the feeding of the five thousand people as we heard in last week’s lesson, and miss the bigger point entirely. Jesus knows this about us. He understands how difficult it is for us to “get it.” This morning’s story begins with the crowd going to find Jesus. Jesus has gone ahead of them and now those who have witnessed this miracle get in their boats and follow Jesus to Capernaum. Once is not enough for them. They come seeking more.

Jesus wonders what it is they really want. Do they want to feast on the leftover meal? Do they want to pick his brain, like one picks at the carcass of an exquisitely cooked turkey, for more tidbits of grace? Do they want an encore for dessert? They have been filled, but they are not satisfied. How often does this happen? It brings to mind the experience I have had with my conferees at Silver Lake. For the past several summers Karen Ziel and I have served as deans for a 5th and 6th grade camp. We provide worship on Wednesday evening. Wednesday is “mission day” at Silver Lake and traditionally, we share communion as part of the evening worship.

Leading the camp in communion is always a highlight of my week. We celebrate communion by intinction sharing four luscious, homemade loaves of bread. When we are done there is always a lot of bread leftover. The kids can’t wait to devour what is left. Truly it is delicious bread, however, I am always a bit disappointed that they can not be satisfied with the bread and juice they have just received. They dive at the bread, tearing it apart rarely offering to share it with their fellow campers. Worship has ended only moments before and here they are as if they had not even been there. I know they are only 11, but what makes me sad, is that so many people, not so young, share this experience.

We act like the crowd that comes in search of Jesus this morning. Jesus understands their motive even if they do not. They ask Jesus what seems like an innocent question. Jesus knows why they are asking it. They want more. They have come not because they want to *know* more, but because

they want to get more. They have come not because they are spiritually inquisitive, but because they see Jesus as the source of their next meal. If he can provide them with bread that easily, maybe he can meet their other needs. They were unable to see beyond the immediate. They can not read the signs. Jesus teaches the people that it is not enough to satisfy their physical hunger. The point is not that he is able to take a few loaves of bread and make it feed a crowd of people. He has come not to fill their bellies but to feed their souls. Their bellies are full and now they want more. Where can we get more of this bread? Can you do it again Jesus? Can you take a couple loaves of bread and make it enough for everyone? Can you tell us how you did it? They are focused on the tangible, the bread that filled their bellies and Jesus wants them to focus beyond the bread.

We can understand how they felt. They see Jesus as their meal ticket. He has shown them that he has the ability to lighten the fundamental burdens of their lives. He just fed 5,000 people without much effort. What more can he do? Tell us Jesus, what else do you have in your bag of tricks? The crowds have yet to understand that what Jesus does is not trickery. They want the formula, to make more bread, to satisfy the physical hungers of the people. They don't want to hear a sermon when their bellies are empty. They want to know how to multiply the loaves, how to turn water into wine.

Imagine what it might be like today if Jesus showed up in a camp in Darfur and multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed the whole camp. There would be many people asking the same questions. Now that their bellies are full, how can we do what you just did? If we could do this we would never be hungry. It is difficult to move to the spiritual realm when we have so many physical needs. I am constantly amazed however, when I have been with people from other countries that have such limited resources, that are truly poor and truly hungry that live from such a place of abundance. They understand what Jesus is saying. They understand when Jesus tells us not to work for food that perishes but for food that will satisfy your soul.

We have a hard time knowing what it is that feeds the soul. This complex world in which we live creates in us an insatiable hunger. We have a hard time distinguishing between what we need and what we want. We look for the quick fix. That is what the crowd was after, the quick fix. Tell me what I need to do to get the free meal, to cut to the front of the line, to get what my neighbor has so I will feel good about myself. Jesus does not feed the crowd to prove his own power. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but

for the food that endures for eternal life,” says Jesus. We are left wondering how we can tell the difference.

The crowd asks Jesus what they can do to perform the works of God? If you won't teach us how to multiply the bread to feed ourselves, then what can we do, Jesus? He tells them to believe in the one God has sent. Don't be so concerned with rushing out to mimic what Jesus has done. Take a moment to consider the larger picture. He wants them to understand that they will not be able to do anything that Jesus does, if they don't believe. From the very beginning, Jesus teaches them that there has to be a faithful, prayerful, thoughtful aspect to their work. Other people may be able to meet the physical needs. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you must consider how to meet folk's spiritual needs.

We understand this difference most clearly when we are engaged in mission work. We know that there is something more that happens at a soup kitchen than providing a meal. We understand that the warm greeting we offer or the smile we share is just as important as the food we put on the plate. Even when we do not speak the same language, we can see the difference it makes when we strive to make a personal connection. We need more than food and water to survive. We need deep connections with other people, we need to know we are loved, we need to know we matter.

Anthony Robinson sees the post miracle encounter with the crowd in a wonderful way. He says, “the crowd asks, ‘Rabbi, how did you get here?’ Jesus answers, ‘you’re not looking for me because you saw the sign, but because you want more bread.’ Back and forth goes the frustrating conversation. They want more miracles. He wants them to give their hearts and lives to his new possibility. They want a quick fix. He wants a change of heart. They want a ‘chicken in every pot.’ He wants a change in every heart. They demand more stuff of him; he asks more life of them.”

Jesus came to provide more than the quick fix. He came to change our hearts. That can not happen in a single encounter. This will only happen when we surrender and agree to journey with Jesus. This will happen when we dive deeply into his story and ask God to reveal to us the truth that lies within that story. This will only happen when we examine our lives to consider where we behave like the crowd and how we can become more like Jesus. We want to know what to do, when perhaps we should be more

concerned with being than doing. Perhaps Jesus wants us to do less and pray more.

There is not something magical in the bread that Jesus provided for the crowd. There is nothing magical about the bread that we share at the table this morning. It is not the bread or the juice that feeds us. After all, this is not much of a meal.