

Sermon for Sunday, July 19, 2009
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THE BREAD OF LIFE
John 6:5-15, 25-35

No doubt, we've had some hard times lately. It's almost too easy to talk about the economy. Unemployment is getting near ten percent. Investments are still off nearly forty percent. We're happy if our income holds steady when so many have less. The federal deficit is trillions of dollars per year, if you can fathom that.

But let me ask: if the economy roared back and was as robust as ever by January 1, you might be intensely relieved, but would you then be happy, satisfied, fulfilled? If you had all the bread you wanted, would you be happy?

John tells the story of a miracle – Jesus multiplied bread to feed hungry people. But what's really interesting to John is what happens next. What happens, then and now, when our needs are suddenly met?

1. The problem – no bread - John 6:5-7

Besides the resurrection, the feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recounted in all four gospels. Clearly, it's an important event. John tells the story his way. When John 6 begins, the authorities in Jerusalem were hostile to Jesus (5:1-29). So he went to Galilee. Large crowds followed him because he was healing the sick (6:3). He was teaching a large group on the eastern side of Galilee when he looked and saw that even more people were streaming toward him.

Can the disciples buy the bread?

The hour is late and the place remote. It's clear that there is a problem. Jesus puts it to Philip, one of the twelve as a question: "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Jesus asked this "to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do" (6:6).

Philip told Jesus the situation was impossible. "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" (6:7). Matthew tells us that the disciples then urged Jesus to send the crowds away so they could "buy themselves some food" in nearby villages (Matthew 14:15). That is, the disciples decided this is not Jesus' problem. He had cared for the crowds long enough. Now they should take care of themselves.

Jesus rejects that idea. "They do not need to go away" and fend for themselves (14:16). The disciples must address the problem. Andrew says, "Here is a boy [or young man] with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (6:9).

If you've gone to church since you were a child, you may have a Sunday school image of a little boy, standing before Jesus, alone, with liquid brown eyes, food outstretched, offering to give away his food. Probably not!

First, the term for boy covers twelve to twenty-year-olds. Second, no parents would send a small child into the wilderness with a crowd of thousands of people.

This young man was probably attached to the disciples somehow, possibly carrying their food. Matthew and Mark say Jesus told his disciples, "You give them something to eat" (14:16). And the disciples say, "We have five loaves" (Matthew 14:17, Luke 9:13; John 6:9). All this makes sense if the young man is with them, holding their meager supplies.

Regardless, Jesus didn't have much: five loaves (rolls) and two small fish. The term for fish is not the generic term ichthus. The word is opsarion, which means a small fish like sardines or fish fragments in a spread for bread. There wasn't much meat! And the loaves are made of barley - a cheap grain that was often fed to animals (6:9). The poor ate barley bread. Most important, five loaves and two fish can't possibly feed this throng. Jesus knew what he planned to do, but wanted his disciples to see that their supply is utterly inadequate. He had to act.

What should we do when we don't have enough?

We don't identify with this because we have little experience with hunger. In the USA, even the poor and the unemployed have plenty of food. In fact, we have too much food. Food and water are available almost all the time. And if we are hungry, we eat. We think of meat, fruit, vegetables and sweets first, not bread. But bread was the stuff of life in those days and lots of people needed it.

The situation teaches us how to consider the problem of inadequate resources. Our story shows the options when we face limitations. First, we can declare the situation hopeless and despair. Second, we can work frantically to solve the problem ourselves, perhaps letting the Lord in at the last moment. Third, we can trust the Lord and humbly do our part.

#1. Despair: The disciples choose this option. They tell Jesus the situation is hopeless and urge him to send the people away to fend for themselves. Jesus dismisses this. Something can be done and it must be done. "You feed them!" he commands. They can't, but he shows them that he can.

The disciples see nothing but the five loaves and the two fish. Jesus knows they are enough in his hands. He tells the people to sit on the grass in groups (John 6:10, Mark 6). So families stay together for the distribution of the food. As the people sat down, they had to wonder what was coming. The word translated "seated" in 6:11 was used for banquets. But how could they expect a feast?

Lesson: We often have very little and what we have looks useless to us. But perhaps it is not, if we offer it to Jesus. Five loaves and two fish ordinarily feed two to three people. But in Jesus' hands it can feed vast numbers. The miracle teaches us to trust Christ to take our poor efforts and make them fruitful.

For example, when a friend is in great need, we may feel there is nothing we can do or say to help. But it may be enough for you to listen, to offer a hug, to bring a simple meal, to pray. Maybe one person can't do much, but five or ten can.

When someone is lonely, we may decide to invite them into our home for a meal. Afterward, we realize that we planned to eat leftovers. Yet leftovers, served with a smile, can be more than enough.

#2. Frantic activism. If the first error is despair, the second is the opposite. We take matters into our own hands, and try to solve the problem in burst of activity. After all his labor, the activist may offer up a prayer, asking God in to finish what he started. How easy it was to plan and work, then say "Lord, bless the decisions I just made." When all is complete, we add, "Lord bless my work, correct my errors, multiply my labors, and, please, let it all work out for me."

It's better to pray at the start, in the middle and as we finish. Then we can ask the Lord to bless and perfect our work. Psalm 90 ends, "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us - yes, establish the work of our hands" (90:17).

#3. Trust God and humbly do our work. The disciples brought what they had to Jesus and waited to see what he might do. It's a basic principle of the faith. Stand before the Lord and say, "This is what I have. Do with it what you can. Multiply it if you will."

Ten years ago, I was writing my most academically demanding book, wrestling with difficult questions and feeling inadequate. I prayed: "Lord could you make me a little smarter for the next few weeks? Give me more capacity to sit still and read, comprehend and analyze other books?" It was an

honest prayer, but misguided. We don't need to become another person, we need to offer who we are to the Lord.

Students: Not, "Lord, give me a higher IQ." Instead, "let me dedicate my mind to you. Take my thoughts and make them yours".

Weary mothers: Not, "Lord give me the capacity to function perfectly on seven hours of sleep. I don't want to need eight or nine any more." Rather, "Lord, take my energy, my hours and use them."

We should still work hard to increase our skills. But we give whatever we have to the Lord. If resources are small and few, Jesus can multiply them. Counselors, builders, lawyers, or bankers can give sound advice, but it's for naught unless clients listen. Doctors can prescribe the right medicine and perform surgery, yet in the end the body heals itself. Or God heals the body. In each case, we perform our duty and ask God to grant his favor. The farmer plants; God gives the increase.

2. Jesus provides bread - John 6:8-13

Let's return to the people sitting on the grass. After they sat down, Jesus "took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed [it] to those who were seated" (6:11). We don't know how it happened; the bread multiplied as Jesus broke it and the disciples distributed the food to the crowds.

Last week I mentioned that skeptics always try to explain away Jesus' miracles. They say: when the lad shared his food, everyone in the crowd pulled out their supplies and shared. Or: Everyone received just a crumb of bread, but because it came from Jesus they were satisfied. Balderdash. The people ate until they were full and there were leftovers, which they gathered and ate later.

The miracle shows that a little is enough, if Jesus makes it so. One young man's lunch fed 5,000 men, plus their families, because Jesus made it so (6:12-13).

That led to a discussion. "The people saw the miraculous sign [and] began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14). That is, Jesus must be the Messiah, God's King, who will restore Israel.

Why did they draw this conclusion? John 6:4 says that this event took place during Passover. At the first Passover, Israel escaped from their slavery in Egypt. At Passover they celebrated this and prayed, hoped for deliverance in their day from Roman occupation and oppression. Recall: when they left Egypt, God fed Israel in the wilderness with bread from heaven, through Moses the prophet. Now Jesus feeds Israel in the wilderness with bread from heaven. Surely he is a prophet like Moses, a king to deliver them from Rome.

Jesus saw this coming, so he withdrew from everyone. He sent the disciples to the other side of the Galilee on a boat. He remained on a mountain, then walked across the lake that night. The people kept looking for Jesus – hoping for more bread from heaven, hoping he was king. Eventually they found him, on the other side of the Galilee, perhaps ten miles away. They are amazed, but can only ask, "When did you get here?"(6:22-25). It's not the best question.

Their problem: They are stuck in the material realm. They want more bread, they want a king, they want to know how he travels. Jesus wants to offer them something better – eternal life, true bread from heaven.

I have a smart dog. She knows 100 words: treat, squirrel, deer, rabbit, front door, back door, sidewalk, bone, friend, run, kiss, sit, stay, let's go, look, walk, come. But the proof of her ability, experts say, is that when we point, she can follow the finger and look for something when we say "look."

People know how to follow a finger to see where it's pointing, but on this occasion Israel failed. With every miracle Jesus was pointing, so that people would look beyond the wonder, the mighty deed. So then:

- Jesus created new wine at a wedding to show that he renewed all things.
- He gave a blind man sight to show he is the light of the world.
- He took five loaves of bread and fed thousands because he is the bread of life.

The finger was pointing. Sadly, the people weren't following. Jesus gave them bread to point them to the bread of life. But next day they wanted more bread.

We've had a series of health challenges in recent weeks. One of our pastors had major surgery to remove a tumor. Another awaits major surgery on an infant son. We have had open heart surgery and other maladies, too. When these people are living their faith, they look beyond the illness, treatment and prognosis. They know where the finger is pointing – beyond the illness.

- They know God is sovereign. Nothing surprises him.
- He knows our life. He numbers our days. He is good.
- They get the best physicians and surgeons, yet they know life is in God's hand. They remain positive even while they're in great pain.

They feel pain, they lament, but remain confident even when they could collapse from fear. They see the reasons to give thanks. They know what we need for life – bread - but not bread alone, physicians, but not physicians alone.

3. The people want more bread - What should we expect from Jesus?

We might expect the people to worship or praise God or say they believe after seeing this great miracle – food for 15,000. But the responses to the miracle are unpredictable. In John 4, one family praises God and believes. In John 5, a crippled man simply takes the miracle and moves on. Sometimes it seems that people have seen Jesus perform so many miracles, they almost expect it. This reminds us that Jesus gives gifts to the undeserving, not just the deserving. We don't merit his grace, we receive it.

In John 6, the people follow Jesus in pursuit of more food. Jesus says, "Don't work for food that perishes but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (6:27).

But the people are activists, so they ask him what they need to do to gain that food (6:28). Jesus replies, "Believe in the one God sent," meaning himself (6:29).

This they grasp, and ask, "What sign will you give that we may believe?" They propose that Jesus make more bread. After all, their forefathers ate manna in the wilderness; if Jesus matches that they say they will believe (6:30-31).

Jesus points out their error in 6:32. They think Moses gave bread, in the past (perfect). Rather, "God gives (present) the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (6:33).

Jesus is practically shouting, "Look to me, look to my gospel for life." The people say: "Give us this bread" (6:34). Do they get it? It's hard to say. So Jesus spells it out: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35).

Jesus' miracle shows he can supply bread, the staple of ancient diets, to alleviate physical hunger. But farmers can do that too. He wants people to look beyond their physical hunger to the spiritual hunger which he alone can meet. That is the "significance" of the sign.

Physical bread "perishes" when we eat it. Jesus keeps pushing the people to look to him, not to the bread. And they keep wanting bread. So he does two things.

First, he says that this is in the Father's hands. These people need to come to life and smell the bacon, they need to be born anew from above. They need eyes to see. If they do – if the Father gives them to me, they will come, I will receive them and raise them up and give them eternal life (6:37-44).

Second, he pushes them harder. Whether anyone eats bread or manna, physical bread gives physical life and eventually that ends. People die. You need "living bread that comes down out of heaven." Then you will never die. He added, "I am the living bread and to gain eternal life you need to eat my flesh" (6:51-54).

This was unattractive to the crowds. They said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" That is, "Who does he think he is?" They were offended and they left (6:41-42, 52-66). But the true disciples stayed. Jesus gave them a chance to leave. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" No", they say, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life" (6:68). The disciples didn't understand everything Jesus said. But they trusted him, so they stayed with him. That is the mark of a true relationship: we stay together even if it's hard, even when it doesn't completely make sense. This is true of a marriage, a friendship, a job, etc. that we want to give up.

4. Jesus offers the bread of life - John 6:25-35

Let's collect our lessons. First, we should turn to Jesus for bread, to sustain our physical life and to find spiritual life. Turn to the Lord Jesus to provide what his people need. We should trust him to satisfy us, now and forever.

Second, Jesus doesn't provide because we are deserving. At first we are undeserving and thankless. He is gracious and compassionate. If we are needy, he supplies. Even if our need rises from our own errors, he is generous.

Third, when Jesus does provide, we should give thanks for the gift and the giver. The gospel turns our attention not to the bread, but to Jesus who provides it. And he provides today for life, both physical and eternal.

Today, bread is optional food; we eat it if we need calories and shun it if we don't. It is a snack to keep us busy before the entrée arrives. But in Jesus' day, bread was the stuff of life, the one food people ate every day. Bread represents the food we need daily (Numbers 21:5, Deuteronomy 8:3, 9; Psalm 137:25; Isaiah 33:16). If we have food and covering, we will be content with that (1 Timothy 6:7-8).

There are some things I'd like to talk about here: The need to look to God for our finances, our food, what we need to live. The danger of trusting in wealth - salaries and savings and well-stocked refrigerators. Important points, but not the point of Jesus in John 6.

The point: when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" he directs our longings and needs to himself. He will satisfy our needs according to God's promises in His word:

God gives light through the law (Psalm 119:105), but Jesus is the Light.

The law shows the way we should walk (Deuteronomy 5:32-33), but Jesus is the Way.

Kings and priests were supposed to shepherd Israel; Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

God promised a land flowing with milk and honey; Jesus is the bread of life.

So then, it is Jesus' nature to satisfy our proper longings – for food, light, guidance and protection. We should train ourselves to turn to Jesus to satisfy our longings. If Jesus doesn't satisfy a longing, we should ask if we're right to seek it.

We tend to seek fulfillment in temporal things. Food, laughter, friends, respect, relaxation and other blessings of this life do satisfy us. We rightly take pleasure in these things. But they never finally satisfy. If we make them our ultimate source of happiness, they fail us.

We all find too much pleasure, too much significance in created things. Some of us find pleasure in food – not bread, but the pleasures of the palate.

Boys and men seek "bread" in sports. When I was a boy, baseball was my life, at least in the summer, for several years. We exercise our bodies not for health but for vanity instead of exercising.

More subtle. A friend confessed: there are people who have more functional power over his heart than Jesus. "Their praise completes me, their rejection ruins me." I can relate to that, unfortunately. Can you? Lord, help us give our hearts to you, so you have more influence than anyone else.

Other people seek a life that's under control. We see a need, a friend whose life is headed the wrong way and we stay out of it. Maybe we pray a bit, maybe we gossip, but we're slow to run after a prodigal who's in a messy situation. It's easier to fill a day watching TV or finding another way to control our time.

So here's the question: What's your bread? What is the stuff that you would dash all around the Sea of Galilee to get? Even if you were on foot? Imagine that you could get an angel to give you one thing... what would it be? The bread? Or:

- A job. A better job. A change at work.
- Something financial. A house. Escape from debt.
- A relationship. Perhaps a desire for a new friend. A desire for romance and marriage. For improvement in your marriage.
- Recovery for some old wound. Longing for a lost season of life. Toxic nostalgia for what was.

Jesus is the bread of life. He alone is worthy of our supreme affection, adoration and allegiance. The gods of this age cannot deliver, cannot satisfy our deepest desires. When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" he invites us to take our needs and hopes to him. Let Jesus be your bread, the true bread that comes down from heaven bringing life.