

## Bread of Life

sermon digest

October 13, 2013

John 6:24-35  
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It is the only miracle reported in all four gospels. Matthew and Mark tell it twice, giving us the idea that its story is significant. John specifically puts it in the context of Passover (6:4), highlighting the theme of deliverance perhaps more than simply the time of year. It recalls God's gracious provision of manna in the wilderness and the communal meal that has kept our Jewish friends, even as our commemorating the Last Supper has kept us. It also seems to have another ancient story suggestively in the background—the story of Elijah feeding a crowd of 100 with 20 loaves of bread in a time of famine (2 Kings 4:42-44). Although Jesus fed many more (5000) with far less (5 loaves and 2 fish) and had 12 loaves left over (symbolically enough for every tribe of Israel), both used food supplied by someone in the crowd and both used “barley” loaves—the bread of the poor. John's version of the story differs at a significant point, some call it a “focal point,” from that of the other gospels. While the other gospels show the disciples carrying out the distribution, Jesus himself acts as the host in John, distributing the loaves and fish, emphasizing that this is his table and “the marvelous abundance that comes into play when Jesus offers his fellowship at table” [E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 216].

As John's gospel does so often, the glare of the spotlight falls full force on the lack of understanding that ensues. Delighted with the windfall, the crowd proclaims Jesus “the prophet” who was to come and prepares to crown him king. Jesus withdraws and in a not so minor aside, walks on water, gathering then with his disciples on the other side of the sea where he will seek to explain to them and the crowd the meaning of what he has just done. Seeking to utilize the listening stance Fred Craddock has so aptly called “overhearing of the gospel,” let's listen in on Jesus' patient effort to bring this clueless bunch along.

**Jesus invites us into a liturgy of abundance.** The crowd catches up with Jesus and, with the insight of all who want just one more sideshow, state their expectations. Seemingly having forgotten events on the other side of the water, they challenge Jesus, “Give us a sign so that we can believe.” As happens repeatedly throughout the gospels, Jesus rejects their clamor, their readiness to settle for too little. “You strain after the food that perishes,” he chides them. “What I have to give you is food that endures.”

Could it be that they had indeed forgotten what had happened only the day before? Or could it be that their level of understanding was such that the best they could do was merely to ask, “Jesus, what are you going to do for us today?” Remember Nicodemus, struggling to grasp the meaning of the new birth? Remember the woman at the well, delighted at the prospect of being forever delivered from the task of fetching water by Jesus' offer of a spring of water gushing up to eternal life? In John's world, encountering Jesus is not about automatic insight and understanding. In John's world and in ours encounters with Jesus may be gravely distorted by preconceived notions about what that encounter can and must mean. And strangely enough, rather than expectations that enlarge what Jesus has to offer, they minimize and reduce it to a paltry sum.

“Remember Moses?” the crowd challenge Jesus. “*He* gave the people manna in the wilderness. Show us what *you* can do.” They failed to see the new world coming as God's kingdom, God's purposes unfolded right before their eyes. Gathering around the past, we like the crowd may seek to limit the present and future to the expanse of the past. Failing to grasp the wideness of the invitation to Jesus' table and the far reach of the abundance we meet there, we may slip back into familiar territory where we can gather in our skirts and restrict our gaze to our needs and the needs of others like us.

I am,” Jesus tells the crowd, “the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” The banquet to which Jesus beckons and the liturgy of thanksgiving around which he calls us to gather is not a hand-to-mouth existence. It is not a situation in which there is barely enough to go around as if the bread and the grace it represents are somehow in short supply. The banquet to which Jesus beckons is a banquet of gratitude in the face of overflowing abundance. It is a banquet that reaches out and welcomes all who hunger.

**We are accountable for the bread with which we are gifted.** The very abundance of the table at which we gather calls us to a twofold accountability: accountability of gratitude before God and accountability in the care of our neighbor. Recognizing ourselves as the recipients of far more grace than we could have imagined, we live, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, in a different kind of

present tense where we are not “driven, controlled, anxious, frantic, or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for” [*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 72]. By way of contrast, think in terms of the ethic emanating from the ubiquitous bumper sticker: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” Less funny than it is probably meant to be, it speaks of a reality in which there is no giver. Each of us is guaranteed only that which we can grasp for ourselves. It produces a way of life marked by anxiety, fear, greed, and brutality and a society deeply divided and at war with itself and others.

Gathered at Christ’s table, however, we are awakened to a different reality. Responsive to the abundance of God’s love we encounter there, we find that we are emboldened as well to become responsive to the needs of God’s children. Called to love our neighbors and by extension, the neighborhood in which they live, we turn our best efforts into addressing the human crises that meet us on every side. In the process, we find ourselves pushing beyond old boundaries and allying ourselves with new partners, leaving no stone unturned in our effort to meet the need.

“The gift of God and the voices of hunger that haunt us urge us beyond the established certitudes of our guilds and beyond the stabilities of old church truths. They push us, all of us, back to the fundamentals of daily bread that cannot be stored, lest it turns foul and breeds worms. There is urgency in our work because of the truth of the bread that is entrusted to us” [Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference*, 188].

For this very reason, on this World Hunger Sunday, we determine to step beyond the sad and maddening division that is afflicting our country in these recent days. And it is for this very reason that we call to our legislators and our fellow citizens to move beyond this impasse and get back to the pressing work of caring for our neighbors and working toward a more wholesome, hopeful future.

For this reason, we raise our eyes to see and celebrate the hopeful, purposeful efforts going on across our community and nation and around our world to extend the bread of hope in situations of hunger, enmity and despair. From the resolution of teachers to serve as Teacher Allies in support of LGBT students in our high school to the 2,785 volunteers in Tennessee who have stepped forward to serve as coaches and mentors for at-risk students seeking to become their families’ first generation to enter and graduate from college, to the human chain of protection and friendship formed by Muslims in Pakistan seeking to protect their Christian neighbors from violence by extremists, to Bread for the World and its determination to “put faith into action” by lobbying Congress on behalf of people in our world who are hungry, we celebrate the good news that the bread of love and welcome is being shared in the world that Christ loves. And, we go forth committed to keeping our eyes open to the need as we seek to join our best resources in becoming the answer.