

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
August 2, 2009
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 6:24-35

The Living Bread

As Julie told you last week, our church has been inundated with requests for help in the last couple of weeks. As a matter of fact, I cannot recall another time from my last seven years here with you when we have so many phone calls and drop-in visits from people who need assistance. We had around five just last Wednesday alone. By late Wednesday afternoon, both Mary Jane and I were exhausted by the amount of pure need. We felt overwhelmed by the number of people who were clearly literally hungry or feeling at the end of their rope.

As I read this passage from the 6th chapter of John, I began to wonder if Jesus ever felt exhausted. Did he ever feel overwhelmed by the number of people who were hungry for food? Did his soul ache when he saw scores of people thirsty for righteousness? Did he ever feel drained by so many who were searching for salvation? The different Gospels do toss out hints that all of the immense need did occasionally get to Jesus. Quite often, after they record a large or intense encounter between Jesus and a group of people, the Gospel writer will then state that afterwards, Jesus went off by himself.

For example, in the text from last week on which Julie preached, we read that after he fed the 5000 with the five loaves and two fish, he withdrew by himself to the mountain. John writes that one reason he left was because the people wanted to make him their king. But I also wonder if it was because Jesus felt exhausted or overwhelmed by the number of people who were clearly hungry or feeling at the end of their rope.

The fact of the matter is that the people who had gathered around Jesus on those days were needy. They were probably literally hungry. John goes out of his way to point out that Jesus had to work with five **barley** loaves for that miraculous meal. In those days, wheat was only used for the bread of the rich. Barely, however, was the food of the poor and the slaves.¹

John wanted to make sure that we, the readers, knew that the people who made up this large crowd following Jesus were low on the social totem pole. They were people who simply subsisted, getting by day by day, paycheck to paycheck. Some of them might have even had to go and knock on the doors of the synagogue from time to time, seeing if there was anything the rabbi or the leaders could do to help them make it for just a few more days.

And I am sure that some people in the crowd, like so many folks Mary Jane and I met this past week, felt demoralized by the fact that they were having to ask for help. Perhaps their spirits were broken because when their child said he was hungry, they could not do anything about it. Or perhaps some of them were depressed because when they looked at the bills, they had to choose between medication or rent or food. These are the people knocking on the office door of our church. And John wants to make sure we, the readers, know that these were also the people gathering around Jesus those days.

Perhaps John wanted to be so explicit about the crowd's need because John wanted us to pay particular attention to how Jesus reacted to them. How did Jesus handle such immense need, such real hunger, such spiritual thirst, such longing? You heard his initial response last week when you studied the beginning of this 6th chapter. When Jesus looked up to see this large, hungry crowd coming towards him, the first thing he did was challenge his disciples to feed them. Literally feed them.

Why? I believe it is because Jesus knew he was a part of an incarnational God—God's Love Made Flesh and Blood—Flesh and Blood who actually got hungry and thirsty. Jesus did not split up soul from body. In Jewish thought, one does not separate the body from soul—rather, it all makes up one living being, one complete nephesh. It was not until the Greek philosophers came along when the duality between body and soul started to take center stage; when body became the code word for bad and soul became the code word for good. As a Jewish man, that kind of duality would not have informed Jesus' thinking.

So when Jesus looked up and saw a hungry crowd coming towards him---people he knew who were hungry for wholeness and salvation, yes; but also literally hungry for food—Jesus responded to their physical emptiness first. He fed them until all were satisfied. He did not initially preach the coming of God's kingdom with his words on that day, but rather, he preached the kingdom with his actions. After giving thanks, he fed those hungry people with literal bread.

When Greg and I were in seminary together, he took a class called "Preaching Good News to the Poor." It was a class that challenged them to take the Gospel literally out onto the streets. They had worship standing on street corners. They did Bible Studies with passengers riding on Marta subway trains. They circled up for prayer with the residents of homeless shelters. For the entire semester, they were challenged to learn how the Gospel sounded to people who were poor, people who were literally hungry, people who felt at the end of their rope. Their final class assignment was something they all did together, with their professors. They spent 24 hours on the streets of Atlanta. On the appointed evening, they dressed appropriately, left all identification at home, and joined the thousands of people who have to survive on the streets.

For lunch, they went to a particular homeless shelter that was run by a church. It had been quite a while since they had eaten. Plus, they had been walking most of the night and day so they were pretty hungry. They got in line with everyone else. And then, people around them started giving them tips. "You can sleep through it," one said. "They can't make you pay attention," stated another. "It is just what you have to do if you want to eat," said the third. Greg quickly realized that before the church would feed the people who had lined up, they would force feed them with worship. Now, I know that "force feed," is probably too strong a phrase. No one was literally forced to go to worship.

But, if you did not go to worship in that church, you were not allowed to eat. As they debriefed later in the day, Greg and his class decided that the church was getting the order wrong. If you want to tell hungry people about Jesus the living bread, you first need to give hungry people the literal bread. Otherwise, the proclamation of the Gospel becomes just another thing to endure, to get through, to pretend to care about so that you can survive.

This sixth chapter of John indicates that Greg's class was not too far off in their assessment. Before Jesus preached one thing about the kingdom, before he said anything about being the living bread, before he spoke of belief or trust or anything else having to do with a relationship with God, he fed them. He filled their stomachs. And then he left and went off to a mountain by himself.

But in the section of the Gospel for today, we see that the crowd, having been filled by Jesus, was not about to let him go. They woke up the next day and gathered again, going over to where Jesus had ministered to them the night before. But to their astonishment, he was not there any longer! Jesus was not where they expected him to be. But that fact did not slake their longing to gather around him again. After all, Jesus had filled their stomachs just one day before. I am sure they hoped he would do it again. Maybe then they would be able to look at their kids without feeling guilty for not being able to provide. Maybe then they might have a bit more leeway in finding a job that would pay the bills. Maybe then they might get another good night of sleep without being awakened by a stomach cramping in emptiness.

So John tells us they all got into boats and then went looking for Jesus on the other side of the sea, in Capernaum. And, sure enough, they found him. And they immediately inquired as to why he had come there. Jesus responded with pointed but gentle words, indicating that he knew the reason they had come after him had little to do with wanting to know who he was, and much more to do with wanting him to feed them again. But notice, he did not condemn them for the misplaced motivation of their search. Rather, he used their continued interest in him as an opportunity to bring them into a deeper relationship.

Jesus saw their desire to be filled by him again with literal bread and he offered them an opportunity to be fulfilled by him as the Living Bread. For Jesus knew that underneath that crowd's physical hunger was the hunger of their hearts, a hunger we all share no matter what kind of resources we have. "Do not work for the food that perishes," Jesus preached, "but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

But the crowd was unable to focus on Jesus' invitation to go deeper. Rather, they were so used to having to work hard for any crumbs of bread that they could get, they asked what kind of works they had to do to get this enduring bread of which Jesus spoke. Again, Jesus stayed with them and tried to open up another conversation. "God has already done the work for the Living Bread. Now you are simply invited to believe into him whom God has sent."

But alas, the crowd still did not understand. And I understand their incomprehension. They were hungry. And Jesus was speaking on so many different levels that it is difficult to fully comprehend what he is saying. The crowd, therefore, does what we so often do when we are confused. They went back to their past. In their attempt to figure it out, they drew on a past event and tried to compare the two experiences. "When we were hungry in the wilderness, Moses gave us manna, bread from heaven. Can you do that? If you can, then maybe we will believe in you too."

Again, Jesus pushed them. "It was not Moses. It was God who gave it to you. And God did not only fill you back then in your collective past. God still gives to you—God gives you the bread

of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And from what John writes next, it seems that something clicks. We are not sure if it was what Jesus said, or the fact that Jesus stayed engaged in conversation with them, or the sense that Jesus truly cared about them and their hungers, but something clicked inside them and the crowd was moved to utter a kind of prayer. “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Like the Samaritan woman who had also truly been seen by Jesus in all of her need and in all of her thirst, those in the crowd were moved to cry out for the deep nourishment that Jesus promised would satisfy all of their hungers, not simply the hunger in their bellies. And in response to their simple prayer, Jesus spoke his most gracious invitation yet: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes into me will never be thirsty.” And I am certain that many in the crowd on that day found a sustenance and a nourishment in Jesus that sustained them far beyond what another meal would have offered.

But, given Jesus’ earlier actions, I am equally as certain that Jesus expected the community of faith to keep helping feed their empty stomachs, too. Because when your child is literally hungry for bread, like 1 out of 10 Americans are each day, it is difficult to hear the promise of the Living Bread. But when you are able to honor both body and spirit, then your witness to his nourishment sinks in deeper than you can imagine.

I spoke with an out-of-town pastor friend last week to see if she, too, had experienced the same kind of increase in requests for assistance in her town. She had. And then she told me an interesting story about her encounter with one particular woman. This woman had initially come to her office needing financial help. And my friend’s congregation helped her the best they could. But then, the woman kept coming back because they struck up a friendship. And she also started coming to worship too.

Last week, the woman reflected on her experience of need with my pastor friend. She said that before coming to that church, she had gone to many other churches in that area. And every one symbolically shut the door in her face. Always within the first couple of minutes of her visit, she was immediately told they could not help and then she would be walked to the door. The woman talked about how those interactions fed her growing sense of shame over having to ask for help. She had grown up in the church but now, no one would even bother to learn her name.

At that point, she looked at my friend in the eye and said that it was not the financial help that my friend’s church had offered that had made such a difference in her life over the last couple of months. It was not the fact that they helped to pay her rent that inspired her to come to worship. Rather, it was the fact that people at that church took the time to learn her name, to learn her story, to pray with her, and to treat her with her God-given dignity. “If other churches would treat people the way this church treats people,” the woman said, “there would be so much more Hope in the world with people like me. So many more people would know Christ and his love. So many more people would know the power of the Living Bread.”

May it be so with you and with me and with our church. Amen.

ⁱ Malina and Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John. Page 127.