



The Bread We Need

By

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First Lesson | Exodus 16:1-5, 31

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim and came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.”

The Israelites called it manna; it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

Second Lesson | Genesis 21:8-21

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who 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.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will

never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Sermon

The two passages of Scripture we just read both speak about literal bread. Both narratives start with the basic human need for food as well. Yet as the events unfold they each talk about much more than what happens when flour, yeast, and water interact with heat.

The first lesson recalls a day when the Israelites began to grumble about food. They were little more than a month removed from God's dramatic rescue of them from Egyptian bondage when they cry out to Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt," they lament "when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Their leaders must have sighed as the people's complaint was inaccurate and a clear exaggeration. The "fleshpots" which they recalled were vessels of boiling meat

from which some people in Egypt would have eaten, but likely not an enslaved people on a regular basis. It strains credibility as well to think they regularly ate all the bread they wanted. Even the charge that the men led them into the wilderness to die sounds to me like one seeking a late-night snack who after examining a full refrigerator and pantry mutters "There's nothing to eat." 45 days had passed since escaping through the Red Sea so they must have found some food to sustain them.

Yet even though their murmurings were an overstatement of reality, Moses takes their complaint to God. In response, the Lord announces a plan to rain bread from heaven with instruction that the people are to gather only enough for one day except on the sixth day when they collect double so they could rest on the Sabbath. In verses we did not read, when the people see a flaky substance on the ground one morning they ask, "What is it?" and Moses answers, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat." Our text concludes: "The house of Israel called it manna; it was like white coriander, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."

In the events prior to our second lesson, Jesus fed 5000 people who gathered along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to hear him speak. Towards the end of a day when he had offered spiritual nourishment through his words, Jesus also provided physical sustenance by starting with five barley loaves and two fish. Afterwards Jesus withdrew from the crowd and crossed the sea in a dramatic way. The next day, some of those who had been present for the feeding saw that only one boat remained and began to look for Jesus. It was only when they crossed over to the western shoreline, too, that they found him. Our reading begins at that point.

“Rabbi, when did you come here?” they ask. In a pattern often seen in the gospels, Jesus does not answer their question, but instead uses it as an opportunity for instruction. “I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” He tells them about the bread of heaven God provides which gives life to the world. Someone in the group says, “Give us this bread always.” It is then that Jesus declares “I am the bread of life.”

Among the seven “I am” descriptions of Jesus found in John’s gospel, such as “I am the good shepherd” and “I am the resurrection and the life,” this is the only one with food imagery. As someone who loves bread in all its forms that choice resonates with me. Your imagination might have been stirred more had Jesus proclaimed, “I am the quinoa of life” or “I am the salad of life,” or “I am the dessert of life.” He chose the more universal image of bread.

In interpreting that image, some have suggested the word “bread” should be equated with his teaching and that Jesus was speaking of the kind of life people find when they seek to follow his instruction. Others hear in those words echoes of the Lord’s Supper, recalling how, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus took bread and said to his first disciples, “take, eat, this is my body broken for you.” Viewed from that lens, Jesus was inviting persons who had tracked him down after a miraculous feeding to take in his essence that it might nourish their existence.

I suspect either of those meanings to have been his primary message but I found myself hearing his words in a

different way, arising from the request of one from that first century day who asked “Sir, give us this bread always.” At its most basic level such a longing reveals our need for literal food. Even though the Israelites overstated their circumstances in the wilderness they did need some kind of sustenance to move forward. The crowd who had gathered on that hillside and were nourished by Jesus in a literal way, too, as it was late in the day and they were hungry. As his followers, one of our most basic responsibilities is to respond to that basic human need, too.

Among the long-standing ministries of the Bryn Mawr church is its hunger ministry. The latest data estimates there are 600,000 people in the Philadelphia region who are food insecure; a term defined as having the lack of access to food required for an active and healthy life due to limited financial resources. This congregation has long been engaged in addressing such physical needs through its casserole blitz and donation of non-perishable foods, the support of 18 agencies that feed people and providing gift cards to local grocery stores.

Jesus wasn’t minimizing the importance of such efforts but instead was speaking here of bread in a more symbolic form. A perspective that leads me to ask: “What feeds your spirit? What nourishes you in a way that is more enduring than food?”

Several weeks ago, our oldest granddaughter and her brother spent Saturday night with us at the manse. One of the blessings of my time with you is the proximity to those two and their parents. This was the first time they had both stayed with us for a sleepover.

At some point that Saturday, she and I were sitting at the kitchen table. I had the worship bulletin and my sermon manuscript on the table. She picked it up and asked what it was. When I told her she looked at the 2 ½ page, single-space document and said, “Are you going to say all of these words tomorrow?” When I said “Yes,” she answered, “I feel sorry for those people!”

Clearly, a sermon is not something that feeds her, at least not yet. She is not alone in that regard as I know that for others what nourishes them most on Sunday mornings is the music or fellowship, the opportunities to learn and serve, or the

inter-generational quality of church life that is rarely found elsewhere in today's culture.

In our lives away from here, too, there are different things that feed us. For you it might be meaningful work and the way it gives you a sense of making a difference for others. It could be those hours you spend working in the garden and the deep connection you find in working the soil. You might be fed by a good book or a well-acted movie, volunteering, or going for a walk with a friend. All kinds of things nourish us.

Jesus didn't try to enumerate every potential source of feeding when he responded to questions long ago. Yet he did tell them and us that we are to work "for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you," making clear the source of such blessings.

When the crowd tracked down Jesus after the miraculous feeding they ask, "What sign are you going to give...What work are you performing" and then misquote a Psalm suggesting that Moses had fed their ancestors with manna. "It was not Moses who gave you the bread

from heaven," Jesus replies, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven...the bread of God," he adds "is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Give us this bread always," they ask and Jesus replies, "I am the bread of life."

Jesus was not disputing the role Moses had played in ensuring the Israelites received manna. Yet he wanted to clearly point out that it was not human beings who had provided for the people's needs. Unstated, but revealed in his very presence was how God was feeding them in that moment through Jesus' words and deeds and demeanor.

Jesus didn't try to explain why some things fed one person and not another. Nor did he spell out exactly what it meant to describe himself as "the bread of life." Yet on that day long ago, he reiterated how God is the source of every experience, every moment that feeds us.

Tom Gillespie, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary during my years as a student once told of a day when was still serving a church in California in the late 1970s. "The intercom rang at my study desk," Tom wrote "and the

church secretary announced that I had an unexpected visitor...Opening the door, I found the four-year-old daughter of a couple in our congregation looking up at me expectantly. Rachel was one of the most precocious children I have ever known,” Tom went on. After witnessing the wonder of Vacation Bible Camp here last week, it’s clear to me that this congregation has many such children, too.

His secretary said to Tom “She has a theological question for you,’....and her tone intimated that I had better know the answer. I invited Rachel to come into my study, got down on my haunches (as my wife, a schoolteacher had instructed me to do when talking to children) and asked, ‘What is it you would like to know?’ ‘Well,’ Rachel replied, ‘I want to know what kind of food God will feed us when we die and go to heaven.’

“The question confronted me with the inadequacy of my theological education,” Tom wrote, “My mind raced back through the memory tapes of courses taken and lectures heard...I was stumped...then suddenly I recall Jesus in John’s gospel saying something about ‘the food that endures for eternal life’ and the Apostle

Paul telling the Corinthians about Israel in the wilderness eating ‘spiritual food.’ So, I conflated the two texts and said to my little visitor, ‘Jesus spoke of our eating spiritual food and it may be that is what God will feed us when we die and go to heaven.’ Rachel thanked me and exited... As the door closed behind her,” Tom recalled, “I was feeling rather smug about my creative answer. Later I learned, however, that Rachel walked over to my secretary and announced, ‘He doesn’t know either.’” (Gillespie, Thomas W. “What is ‘Theological’ About Theological Education?” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, p. 55)

You and I don’t know all that Jesus had in mind in identifying himself as the Bread of Life. Nor do we need to understand why one thing feeds our spirit while another does not. Instead, all we know is the source for everything that feeds us in that way, leading quite naturally to offer our praise to God. And perhaps even to join our voices with the hymn writer of the 20th century in praying “Feed me ‘till I want no more. Feed me ‘till I want no more.”

