

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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John 6:24-35
The Bread of Life

Years ago I regularly took part in Wednesday-evening, Lenten worship services with a group of Baptist preachers. One pastor, Fred Richmond of New Omega Baptist Church, had the habit of looking at whichever preacher was slated to bring the word that evening and say to him, "I'm hungry tonight." Of course he was not speaking about literal food, but about being hungry for spiritual food. It was his way of encouraging that preacher to present a well-cooked, rich in calories, soul-satisfying sermon that evening.

Serving up spiritual food can be a tricky business. When it comes to faith, people can be very finicky eaters. Some complain their church isn't using the right recipe and that other churches offer better menu selections and feed many more people. Some object to the music that accompanies the meal. Some argue that the current chef's sermons are too spicy or too bland and nowhere near as good as the meals prepared by the previous management.

In John 6 we're told a story that appears in all four gospels, of how Jesus fed a huge crowd of over 5,000 people from a boy's gift of a few loaves of barley bread and two fish. The story makes it quite clear that the people all ate as much as they wanted, that they were fully satisfied by this miraculous meal (Jn 6:11,12). Then, on the next day, they went in search of Jesus. Why? Partly to learn more from him; partly to be fed by him – literally to have their bellies filled again. Which is why Jesus' first words back to them are, "Don't work for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life" (6:27).

In one commentary on this passage, the writer mentioned how missionaries to China back in the 1800s had a name for persons who came to church because they were hungry for material food. These people would be baptized and join the church and remain active members as long as their physical needs were met by the congregation. But once their prospects improved and they no longer needed food handouts, they would disappear from the church. The missionaries called them "rice Christians."¹

Jesus fed the 5,000. The next day, when some of them sought him out, Jesus said, "You are looking for me, not because you understood yesterday's miracle but because you ate your fill." In effect, he called them "rice Christians." These are the people who see faith and church involvement as something you choose for yourself and use to meet your own personal needs. It was true in the first century, in China in the 19th century, and in Pittsburgh in the 21st century. I don't say this to be overly harsh but to honestly name a dynamic that, to some extent, is present in almost every one of us and in every congregation of believers.

Following Jesus will always be more complicated than we want it to be. Think about the miracles he performed. Someone comes to Jesus who is blind or lame or hungry, and

Jesus opens their eyes, heals their body, or feeds them bread. But those acts are not the real miracles. The true miracles are when, through the healing or the feeding, people discover the depth of God's love that reaches down from the highest heaven to embrace them. That's why after the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus says, "You are working for food that perishes; seek instead the food of eternal life. Don't talk to me about manna from long ago (past tense). God gives you (present tense) the bread from heaven." One miracle was done so that they might see the real miracle. Words were spoken so we might hear deeper words of faith. Bread was shared so that we might finally taste the bread of life.

In preparing for this sermon, I laughed out loud when one commentator spoke about how Jesus used the crowds' questions as "teachable moments," for that phrase immediately called to mind the image of Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Henry Gates, Jr. and Sgt. James Crowley sitting at a table sharing a beer together. I suppose "teachable moments" are whenever you take an event and step back from the immediate details long enough to see the deeper issues involved. In the Gates-Crowley situation, you had a man at his own home and a policeman who had sworn to protect the neighborhood. You have a black man, long accustomed to being questioned about his motives for whatever he's doing, and a white man, who benefited from a handgun and the right to incarcerate almost at will. Neither man acted exceptionally well that day; but their drama touched on long, simmering issues about race and power and injustice in America. So perhaps a beer and a conversation-instead-of-confrontation made sense as they sought to turn a sad drama into a teachable moment for us all.

Jesus said three things that day long ago. He told his followers not to seek the bread that perishes, but the bread that endures. He told them not to look for another sign, as if that would answer all their questions and doubts, but rather to trust in the God of the manna of old and the giver of the bread of new life. And when that teachable moment seemed to bear fruit, Jesus moved from answering questions to self-disclosure. He said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." On a surface level, those words cannot be comprehended. Rice Christians and rationalist Christians will scratch their heads about the deep meaning of those words. But for others, for those open to God's grace and Christ's deeper message, Jesus at that point offered himself, the real bread of life, offering it to those who, like Pastor Richmond, came to him and said "I'm hungry tonight."

As a pastor, I've presided over a lot of funerals. And when I was thinking about this passage and trying to picture some way to describe what it means to feed on this bread of life, I remembered Ted Brooks' recent funeral. Ted was a good guy and in eulogizing him, one of his friends told about how Ted always seemed to look out for the ones others would ignore. How he talked to a poor man on the street who was carrying a chair he'd found somewhere to his nearby apartment. And how later Ted quietly excused himself from the dinner out with friends to help that man carry the chair up the stairs to his walk-up apartment.

Every life is full of thousands of events. Think about the anecdotes you've heard shared at funerals; and how a simple act of compassion can sometimes encapsulates an entire life. It should make us wonder what anecdote might be shared at our own memorial service. I believe that those special moments occur by grace and result from someone being fed by the bread of life.

We should not be too hard on the people who sought out Jesus for less-than-perfect reasons. Their faith has a lot in common with our faith. Their lack of full comprehension mirrors our own obtuseness and confusion. They want to be fed, to be filled, yes, as well as to know what to do, just like every one of us; and still the answer is the same: "The work of God is to believe in him whom God has sent. To trust on a deep level. To walk by faith, not by sight. To be a living miracle."

In so doing, we discover our days can have lots of memorable events – a Ted Brooks' moment of compassion, a conversation shared over a beer with an adversary, a prayer spoken that connects us with someone in need or someone we love, enlivened by a God who listens and loves so well. The miracle of the incarnation is that the deepest truths of the spiritual are made real in the physical even though they're not limited to the physical. So we gather at this table to eat bread that is more than bread. We rub shoulders with others who are more than just other people. We speak words, digest food, and are fed in ways that are much more than mere rituals.

Let Christ's word suffice for you this day and always, as the mystery and miracle of faith feeds your very soul: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

AMEN

¹ O. Benjamin Sparks, Feasting on the Word, Proper 13: John 6:24-35, "Pastoral Perspective", p. 308.