



Bread and Dependency

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost~August 5, 2018*

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

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 fleshpots 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." Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

Psalms 78:23-29

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| 23 | So you commanded the clouds above *
and opened the doors of heaven. | 27 | You rained down flesh upon them like dust *
and winged birds like the sand of the sea. |
| 24 | You rained down manna upon them to eat *
and gave them grain from heaven. | 28 | You let it fall in the midst of their camp *
and round about their dwellings. |
| 25 | So mortals ate the bread of angels; *
you provided for them food enough. | 29 | So they ate and were well filled, *
for you gave them what they craved. |
| 26 | You caused the east wind to blow in the heavens *
and led out the south wind by your might. | | |

Ephesians 4:1-16

I, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

John 6:24-35

On the next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 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."

Not too long ago, a Roman Catholic Priest came to consult with me, concerned about his use of alcohol. Wondering if he had developed a dependency, he described his daily routine of a drink before dinner followed by two more drinks during the evening as he worked alone in his room, until falling asleep in his chair. Another man has been a client of mine for some time. Married, with a strong relationship with his wife and a devotion to two young children, he nevertheless finds himself going to the computer in the middle of the night to visit chat rooms and look at pornography. We had worked together for almost a year before he could share his secret. A third man weekly describes his participation in Gamblers Anonymous and how he has worked to remain “bet free” for over a year. As I listen to these individuals, my mind sometimes drifts to my own habits, appetites and attachments; the ways in which I might seek out pleasures and relief. How easy it can be to succumb to the seduction of a scotch and bowl of potato chips in front of the TV at the end of a long day. How I can crave comfort at times, and distract myself with all kinds of gadgets and indulge in material things, often avoiding the sense that I am really dependent upon God.

Addictions, it seems, are all around us! Besides whatever personal demons with which we might struggle, we hear constantly about America’s addiction to everything from fossil fuels to our phones. You name it! Of course, not all indulgences are addictions, but we certainly are possessed by many attachments, and often rely on an array of mind and body altering things to quell our hunger and thirst. The Hebrews might be forgiven for becoming a bit testy about their sojourn in a desolate land without obvious sources of food and drink. On this very day, millions of people will be physically hungry, and in the face of such deprivation, thinking about the reality of spiritual hunger can seem like the very definition of privilege. But many human hungers spring from deep emotional needs and thwarted desires. For all the strength and beauty of being human, we are also “but flesh” as the psalmist says: vulnerable in our physical and emotional states. We are creatures who exist, as poet Mary Oliver says, (in and through) “the soft animal of our bodies.”

Addiction, after all, is desire run amok. It’s a process which begins with attraction and satisfaction and continues to the point where the hunger cannot be satisfied. Before we had neurochemical models to explain the addictive brain, psychology used to speak in terms of “thwarted oral desires” from childhood; some deprivation of a basic emotional need. Of course, as all you parents know, what child ever ceases to want more of certain things: more candy, more ice cream, more screen time...more hugs. And unless we develop a strategy of radically denying these needs and desires—becoming anorexic in our rejection of certain pleasures—we continue to desire certain comforts throughout our lives. And why shouldn’t we! Desire is what drives our being and orients our attention. Without it, we’re dead in the water. But if our desire gets hooked on the wrong stuff, or even, “too much of a good thing” we can find ourselves derailed and feel dead-ended.

In the scene from John’s gospel proclaimed today, Jesus has just moved on from the extraordinary feeding of the multitudes. Jesus is not indifferent to the physical hungers of the body but is especially concerned about the hunger of the soul. He challenges those who have come after him to see beyond the tasty bread in order to grasp the “sign” and to set their hearts on the bread which does not perish and the life of the spirit which is eternal. Like the Samaritan woman at the well who desired the water which would allow her never to thirst, someone here asks for this amazing bread which will take away all hungers.

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 thirst.” Had I been there on that particular day, I think I might have been tempted to ask: Really. Do you mean what you’re saying? Isn’t this a bit of an exaggeration; some sort of exercise in the hyperbolic? I think Jesus might have just looked at me, sighed, and then gone on to use me as an example of a person of little faith!

Thomas Jefferson famously created his own edition of the New Testament in which he removed all references to miracles and the supernatural. This was the pinnacle of the rationalist philosophy which sought to establish religious faith “within the limits of reason alone.” The main line Protestant tradition has often tilted toward Christianity as a force for moral good, preferring to emphasize the social gospel over the messiness of extreme emotionality and spiritualism. Let the Roman Catholics keep their saints and devotions and “priest-craft” and ideas about a magical transformation of the Eucharistic bread! But of course, life isn’t exactly a rational enterprise most of the time, as much as we would like it to be. Every extreme provokes a counter-reaction, and while a rational religion may be efficient and adequate for some things, it fails to address the deep hungers of the human soul and the wisdom of giving oneself to the fantastic proposition of God’s desire to be fully within and among us. Jesus’ discourse on the himself as the bread of life is not merely a metaphor, but a deep symbol meant to provoke our imagination and challenge our narrowness of mind. But the essence of it is not the bread itself, it is

the invitation to come to Jesus again and again, and to receive a love which cannot be contained.

Sometimes, when I'm speaking with someone who is a member of a twelve-step program and who continues to talk about their effort to turn their life over to their "higher power," I feel deeply humbled. We probably can never really achieve deep dependence upon God until we have to fight for our lives or the life of someone else and turn our will and desire to God alone. This is what Jesus may have in mind. As long as we are in the flesh, we will be pulled by all sorts of desires and often feel too attached and unbalanced. As John Dunne, a priest and theologian at Notre Dame, has written in *Deep Rhythm and the Riddle or Eternal Life*, "I want to say... 'God is my desire,' for I can feel the peace in that standpoint, but I can also feel the tug of the many desires pulling me in all directions." For Dunne, the answer lies in a surrender to a deeper rhythm of our lives which carries us through darkness and light toward the light of Christ. Having a "spiritual life" does not mean we become evacuated of our desires and the troubles they can get us into. It means we continue to cultivate a desire for God—a hunger for God and God's truth and justice that elbows out other competing desires or arouses us from slumber of indifference which might only be repressed desire. And after all, Jesus doesn't simply scold us and send us on our way. He invites us to come, to stay with him, to find our footing again, to find our place, to be fed. Give us this day our daily bread as well as the true bread from heaven which is Jesus in the flesh...and in our flesh. We are "but flesh." All too human at times. Always beckoned by grace.