

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 2, 2009  
Pentecost 9  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 16:2-15  
Psalm 78:14-25  
Ephesians 4:17-25  
John 6:24-35

Our Gospel lesson today follows two miraculous events that have appeared in our readings the last two Sundays, namely, the feeding of the 5,000, and subsequent to that the experience of Jesus walking on water to the disciples on the storm-tossed sea.

As our Gospel lesson today begins, the crowd that witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 is looking for Jesus. That's not surprising, for throughout John's Gospel, and throughout history, people seek Jesus for all kinds of reasons. They almost never, however, find what they *expect*.

This crowd is looking, though, and we can understand why. These people are poor, hungry, and living under Roman occupation. Suffering and violence are commonplace to them. They know what it means to live from day to day, to go hungry, to be in want. They are acquainted with fear and desperation. It's hard for me to understand this, because I have never been in a situation where I did not know the source of my next meal.

But these folks were well-versed in how that felt. And so when they see what Jesus did on that hillside with only five loaves of bread and two fish, they latch onto Jesus and they follow.

But this crowd is not merely hungry for food, as important as that is. There is more. These folks are not only seeking *food*, they are seeking *meaning*. They want bread, yes. But they also want *significance*, they want to be filled spiritually as well as physically.

It can be hard to be aware of this deeper, spiritual hunger when you're spending most of your energy trying to survive at the material level. And so Jesus points this out to these folks. He says to them, "you sought me out and want to be with me because I fed you, not because you saw the miraculous sign."

You see, the feeding of the 5,000 was about more than just miraculous meal. It was a sign of something deeper. It wasn't about the huge crowd that was eating, it was about the man who was feeding them. God was acting through this man in a special way. And this crowd that now presses upon Jesus *witnessed* that, but they did not truly *see* it. They witnessed Jesus doing what he did, but they did not truly *see* Jesus as the chosen One of God, the One sent to change them and their world.

What they see is a man who is a source of "magic bread." And their question in verse 28, "what does God want us to do?" is in reality the question, "what does God want us to do in exchange for the [magic] bread?" What is the

formula? What is the *quid pro quo*? What is the legal transaction? What do WE need to do in order to keep the ol' gravy train (or bread train) rolling?

They seek Jesus. But as is often the case, what they find is not what they expect. Jesus tells them, “spend your time seeking the eternal life that I, the Son of Man, can give you.”

Jesus' words don't engender a great reception. Who cares about eternal life when you can have a steady supply of bread and not worry about ever going hungry again? I guess when you've been in dire need of something for so long -- whether it be food, or money, or approval, or whatever -- you can be tempted to think that if you only had enough food, or money, or approval, or whatever, that you would be satisfied, that your life would be complete.

Not true. It's not true because we're not just seeking *food*, we're seeking *meaning*. We're not merely hungry for *bread*; we're hungry for the *bread of life*. And Jesus has come to help folks truly *see* this, to help folks see that beyond our need for *food* is our need for *God*, for relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus invites this crowd, and us, to that relationship. It is a relationship of faith. Jesus invites us not merely to be mindful of what he *does*, but he calls us to see *who he is*, and to trust that he alone can meet the deepest needs of our hearts.

Unfortunately, we live in a day and age where Jesus isn't fashionable, and so it is always tempting to bypass Jesus and look for cheap substitutes. Sometimes

those substitutes come in a bottle. Sometimes they come on a computer screen. Sometimes they come at the office or in the marketplace. But there is always something that promises to fill up the empty space within our hungry selves.

And so we careen from one fix to another, trying to stay just ahead and out of sight of the emptiness that hounds us. When someone or something comes along that promises more, we rush to get in line, credit card in hand. When the latest hobby, fantasy, addiction, or self-deception lets us down, we scan the horizon for another substitute, ready to embrace anything what will convince us that we are not, in the words of Walker Percy, “lost in the cosmos.” [Walker Percy, *Lost in the*

*Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1983]

In the midst of these cheap substitutes, and in spite of them, comes this loving invitation: “I AM the bread of life; no one who comes to me will ever be hungry again.”

The puritan writer Thomas Boston said: “faith is the daily traveling between our emptiness and Christ’s fullness.” That may be one of the greatest definitions of faith I’ve ever heard.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, it may be that you are at a place in your life where you may be struggling to trust God’s provision for a need in your life. You may even be at a place where a substitute is looking more and more attractive.

As we receive these tangible symbols of bread and wine this morning, let us open our hearts to the presence of Jesus here with us and among us. Let us feed on him in our hearts by faith. And let us give thanks that he is here to meet the deepest needs of our hearts.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.