

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
August 5, 2012
John 6:24-35

Dear God, as the calendar turns to August and thoughts drift towards fall, back to school, and new schedules, we ask that you help us to slow down during these last few weeks of the summer so that we can enjoy the longer days and the time it brings for rest and refreshment. When we turn to things that tire us and sap us of energy, help us to turn towards you for life giving nourishment. For it is you that sustains our lives and feeds our souls. Amen.

“That Which Gives Life”

It is a cardinal rule of preaching to never speak of one’s children or vacations in one’s sermon. Most of you know that I break the first rule with great regularity. I’ll also break the second one today but will spare you my 500 pictures of the Grand Canyon. I figure we probably travelled over 6000 miles this summer . . .thankfully not all of them in an RV . . .though it was a lot of fun or, what Tommy dubbed, an “epic adventure”. And Terry and Henry travelled even further since that spent 10 days in the boundary waters of Canada, paddling and portaging over 96 miles in canoe.

Suffice it to say that when travelling that much either by car, plane or RV, you see a lot of signs. And signs are a good place to begin this morning, because the Gospel of John calls a series of stories about Jesus, and the things he does, signs. We call them miracles, like the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 you heard last week. But John calls them signs, because they point to the startling theological claim that John makes, which is that Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh.

Now on our travels, we saw a lot of signs. Some of them signaled our location, such as the moose crossing sign in Vermont or the elk crossing sign in the Grand Canyon, others warned us of something, like the sign at the Texas rest area right next to the playground that said, “beware of snakes”. And then there are signs that let us know we were a long way from home, such as the one that said “Los Angeles this way”. When I saw that, I knew we’d come a long way.

When the kids and I drove to Pittsburgh to meet up with Terry, Tommy was my co-pilot. Turns out Tommy is good at reading signs. He’d point out the sign, letting me know how far much further we needed to go . . .things like that which helped me not to get lost.

And that the purpose of a sign, isn’t it? They help us to not get lost, to stay on track. They point to something; they encourage us to look ahead. Which all sounds fairly simple, until one misses the sign.

And that happened to us plenty of times. We’d miss the sign and would need to turn around and go the other direction, which isn’t all that easy in a 32 foot RV.

In today's reading, the story we just heard John tell, the people missed the sign. Or should I say, they missed the point of the sign. They thought the sign was about bread, but really it's about life. More specifically, the life Christ offers us if we are willing to believe and follow.

Our reading piggy backs on last week's story which, as I said, was about Jesus feeding the crowd of 5000 with 5 fish and two loaves of bread. It's a familiar story that all four gospels tell. You know the one. There are 5000 famished people gathered on a hillside, and when Jesus finds them he's moved to feed them, so he gathers 5 fish and 2 loaves of bread from a boy sitting nearby, and feeds them to entire crowd and *even has some leftovers*. It is what we would call a miracle, but for John it's sign, and it points to something larger. But, just like we can't always get past the questions of "How did this happen? Or "Is it true?" and move to a new level of understanding, neither can the people. In fact, the people completely miss the point of the sign.

And that's where our story for today picks up. The people love Jesus so much for filling their bellies with yummy bread so much, that they want to make him a king. But Jesus doesn't want any part of that, so he heads to Capernaum to avoid a coronation.

But the people find him. The people find him, and they want to know why he left them. "Because," Jesus told them, "it's not really me you're after, you're after a full belly." You're following me because I fed you, and now you're looking for more. But that's not what I'm about; that's not why God sent me. If you're looking for a quick fix or fast food, you need to look elsewhere. But I, I can give you food that lasts for eternal life."

Having piqued the crowds' interest, they ask him, "Well, what are you going to do to give us this bread?" I love that question, "What are you going to do?" they want to know. But Jesus knows that you can't have your cake and eat it, too.

But their question underlines the all-too-familiar longing for a religion of convenience, a religion that won't ask too much of me; a religion that meets my wants and needs. A religion where I can be a fan, but not necessarily a follower. Where I can be a spectator, but not necessarily a participant. And there is a big difference between the two.

How many of you have been watching the Olympics? Yes? I've been watching a lot of Olympics. The kids and I were in NH for the first few days of it, and because it was rainy outside we watched almost all of the coverage last Saturday and Sunday. You know you watch a lot of Olympics when someone says to you, "I'll be right over after the road race and the men's prelim" and you know exactly what they're talking about because you're doing the exact same thing. I'm doing my best to avoid the spoilers and find myself doing this () when spoilers come on TV.

There's a commercial that's been running during the games that shows the hands of the cyclist or feet of the diver or arm of the shot put thrower that says, "You know the latest best seller everyone's reading? Yeah, I haven't read it." Or, "I haven't ordered dessert in

two years.” And, “I haven’t watched TV in over a year”. It’s about the sacrifices Olympians make. Well, when that first aired in our house there was a cry of, “What no dessert or TV in a year?” One honest person in our house said, “I’d never do that.” And you know what? That’s fine. When it comes to the Olympics, some of us are called to be spectators, and some of us are called to participants.

But when it comes to following Jesus, we’re called to be participants, not just spectators. The people in the story want to be spectators. They look for Jesus because they want more bread, not because they want to follow the very Bread of Life. They’re big fans of Jesus, but not necessarily followers.

They like their fast food diet; it tastes good; it doesn’t require much work on their part and very little money. But Jesus knows, and tells them, that junk food will never sustain them or give them the nutrients they need. Now, if they’re looking for a healthy alternative that really gives life, well . . .that He can give you. Because what Jesus has to offer will do more than just fill you up, it will fulfill you. And there’s a big difference there.

Have any of you ever had a craving for a particular food, but because you’re on a diet you’re trying to avoid it and instead wind up eating other stuff instead, only to find yourself full but not satisfied? Have any of you ever done that? I have. I’m dieting and I really want to eat a bowl of ice cream, but because I shouldn’t I eat something else instead, but it’s not what I’m craving so I eat something else, and then something else, until I realize that nothing I’m eating is really going to satisfy, and now I’m full and should have just eaten the bowl of ice cream in the first place. It’s a classic dieter’s dilemma. Or nemesis.

Well, that’s what’s going on here. The crowd is following Jesus, craving the next free meal, but Jesus knows that they’re chasing empty calories. That the bread searching for will fill them up, but will not satisfy. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” he says, “but for the food that endures for eternal life.” Because the only thing that can really satisfy is the bread God offers, the life God offers, which is a life that not only fills bellies, but feeds bodies, minds and souls, too.

What is it a sign of?

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This story that is a sign is about life. It is about the life that Christ offers us, which is a life of abundance, where we are not only filled but fulfilled, because our lives have a purpose beyond ourselves, beyond the rat race, beyond the 12 hour days and 7 day work weeks. It’s a life where we can stop asking each other and ourselves, “What are you hungry for?” Where we can stop rummaging through the pantry of life, because Christ offers a life that brings joy and love and fulfillment.

“Sir, give us this bread,” the crowd says.

Come to me, Jesus says. Believe in me, Jesus says. And you will never be hungry. You will never be thirsty.

That is what it is a sign. It is a sign of life. It is a sign that Christ offers bread eternal to feast on, rather than junk food that withers and dies, or causes us to wither and die—whether that is mentally, physically, or emotionally. That’s what it is a sign of.

I loved something Marian Wright Edelman said once: “Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere” (*The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small*, p.57).

Henry David Thoreau said he wished to learn what life had to teach now “and not when I come to die, discover that I had not lived” (Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 87).

When we first arrived at the Grand Canyon, and saw it in all its glory, we all said, in practically a chorus, “There it is, Jim.”

That line comes from a story my family of origin likes to tell, a story that’s almost become a folklore of epic proportion.

Way back when, probably not long after the Grand Canyon became a national park, maybe around 1922 or 1923, my grandfather (we called him Cha-Cha) and his brother, Uncle Jimmy, were our out west and heading home to Iowa via the Grand Canyon, because Uncle Jimmy couldn’t wait to see the Grand Canyon. If he felt like I felt, it was an excitement that is unmatched.

But when they got to the Grand Canyon, Cha-Cha didn’t even stop the car. Just whizzed right on by, at a decent clip I’d guess, and pointed out the window, “There it is, Jim.”

You see Cha-Cha was dating my grandmother at the time, and was apparently so smitten, and so in love, that he didn’t want to waste another minute away from her, even to stop at the Grand Canyon.

“There it is, Jim.” We used that phrase over and over, but always with the understanding that life is to be lived with great joy and love with eyes and mind and heart wide open. That life is far too precious to go rummaging through the pantry we call life, wasting it on things (or even people) that may fill us for the short term but not for the long term.

I am the bread of life, Jesus said. Here it is, Jim, life abundant, waiting for you.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

