

Year B Proper 18 Redirecting Our Desires John 6 24 to 35

First, a quick reminder about the context of this story...Right before today's gospel, Jesus has miraculously fed the five thousand with the loaves and fishes and then walked across the water during the night to join his disciples in the boat. The crowd awakens the next morning and wonders how it is that Jesus has left them when they knew he had stayed behind and there had been only one boat. As some boats from Tiberias draw near, the crowd uses these boats to follow where the disciples had gone the evening before. When they find Jesus on the other side of the sea, they want to know when and how he had gotten there. With this bewildered and wondering crowd, we begin today.

As we hear the crowd eagerly questioning Jesus today, we note that throughout John's Gospel, Jesus uses the questions of a people hungry for knowledge, hungry for a life better than what they have, as a springboard to tell them what *he* wants them to know. Jesus redirects their earthly desires toward what will truly satisfy all desires. He directs them to himself.

Human creatures are desiring creatures. We always want something. Corporations know this. Businesses know this. They exist to fill a need, to fill our needs. Advertising companies count on the fact that we are desiring creatures and, indeed, they go a step further. Advertising companies create desires – they tell *us* what we want. We need only watch a few television commercials or read a few magazine ads to get the gist of what they are doing. They are aiming our desires toward the good life...telling us we need to build wealth, to attain financial security, to enjoy life with a beautiful new car, a bigger, better house, a new wardrobe, and so on. And – even better – they have us believing that if we listen to them, we can achieve this wonderful life of luxury and contentment at a bargain price.

This is where the crowd in the story is at. Their contentedly full bellies that feasted on free fish and bread are now feeling a little empty. They want more of what Jesus had given to them – they want to satisfy their desires. Jesus is well aware of this human drive to satisfy earthly desires. When the crowd asks him *when* he had arrived on the other side of the lake, he ignores that question and

gets to the heart of the matter. “You are looking for me,” he tells them, “not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

Jesus understands that we, and the crowd in front of him then, are created by God – created to be in perfect unity with God. This is to be our foremost desire, hardwired into us, to yearn for life with God in God’s kingdom. As broken people living in a broken world, our desires, too, have been broken. Rather than having an all-consuming vision of the good life as being the life of God’s kingdom – living in perfect love and harmony with God and all created existence, we picture the good life in earthly terms...house, car, money, friends, drinks on the patio, vacation on the beach, etc.

There is nothing inherently wrong with those things. Where we go wrong is seeing them as an end in themselves – thinking they *are* the good life rather than being a small part of living the only true good life. Jesus acknowledges our desire for the earthly good life – you want to fill your bellies, he says – but then he immediately reveals to us the true aim of our desires... “work for the food that endures for eternal life,” he says, “the food that the Son of Man will give you.” Here Jesus tells us he will give us that food and later he clarifies that he *is* that food. In other words, Jesus is giving to us himself. We are to take him, our gift from God, into ourselves to abide in him as he abides in us – to be one in him as he is one in God the Father. We experience this unity each time we share the bread and wine – the body and blood – of Christ. As we offer ourselves to him, he gives himself to us. And because we share this body and blood in common with each other, we are not only made one with Christ, we are made one with each other in Christ – the body of Christ gathered together as one body.

The crowd misses his point though. They hear the word “work” and latch onto it. This is the other piece to our desiring natures that advertising companies play on so well. Getting what we desire takes work. We desire the good life and getting the good life requires money. But, the ads tell us, we deserve that life, that life is attainable and worth every penny we spend on it. And so, from a young age, society drills it into us that if we just work hard enough, and if we just save smart enough, that good life – and all that goes with it – will be ours. It’s a very

individualistic, “every man for himself”, sort of mentality. We work to take care of ourselves and our families. We put in the hard work and we will reap the rewards. Jesus puts the brakes on that line of thinking.

Rather than presenting them with a list of “works” to do, Jesus speaks about one work – the “work of God.” He says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” To believe is the work of God...That phrase is wonderfully ambiguous. Is the “work of God” *our* work *for* God according to his will or is the “work of God” that which *God* accomplishes? It is both. To believe is the work of God...all of together with God. We do the work of believing but we believe through the power of God’s grace given to us. It is God who makes belief possible in the first place by giving us the Son, the bread from Heaven.

Importantly, the belief that Jesus is talking about here really is work. Jesus is not speaking of belief as simply a thing, a thought that we have in our heads. Jesus uses the verb form of belief – it is an action, something we do. “We can believe in justice as a thing,” says artist and theologian, Elizabeth Gray King. “We can believe in love and care and kindness and humility,” she says. “But until we start living and acting as love, living out that care, graciously spilling over with kindness and working with others in humility as compared to power, a belief is just a belief, almost an object to be admired ... Believing in resurrection is ok,” she writes, “Living resurrection is quite another thing.” [Elizabeth Gray King, “[Sermon](#)” (Didsbury: Didsbury United Reformed Church, 11 April 2021) accessed on 21 April 2021]. Belief is active and it is accomplished with God. We do not go it alone.

At this point, rather than go with Jesus along his line of thinking and ask him something like, “What can we do that shows our belief?”, they ask Jesus for proof that they should believe in him as sent by God. This makes me shake my head. They experienced the miracle of the feeding but, clearly, they really did not truly see it as a sign because here they are asking for another. They apparently want a sign from the “old days” repeated. They remember the story of Moses and the manna, and seem to be requesting something like that. Clinging to the past is something many Christians do quite well. Remembering the “good old days” of full pews, bustling Sunday Schools, and coffers overflowing with money is a

favourite pastime of plenty of church-goers. Not only is this rating the church in terms of the world's idea of success instead of God's but, in looking to the past like the crowd in the story, we, too, fail to see when God is doing something astonishingly new right in front of us.

Jesus takes their fondly remembered story of Moses and the manna and he re-explains it to them to emphasize *God's* activity in the story. And, Jesus takes the story out of the past and brings it into their present time. Moses was not the giver of the manna, God *is* the giver of the bread from heaven. The true bread was not the manna, but it *is* the bread of God that has now come down from heaven in the person of Jesus.

Jesus brings the story into our present time as well. He *is* our Bread from Heaven that sustains us. Jesus directs our eyes away from earthly desires in order to desire him above all else. And as our eyes gaze on Christ we see not the good life of this world but the only true life. As our eyes gaze on Christ we see God's present activity in our story – around us, in us, and through us.

Filled with Christ, the bread of life, we live in the world, equipped, Paul tells us, to build up the body of Christ until all things are in unity in Christ, all creation is living the true good life of God's kingdom. As we slowly re-emerge from this pandemic, I wonder what astonishingly new thing God will do. Just imagine how we will be the bread of life for a hungry world.