

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

Right before today's gospel, Jesus has miraculously fed the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish and then walked across the water during the night to join his disciples. 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 confused and questioning crowd, we begin today.

As we hear the crowd eagerly questioning Jesus, 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 meant 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 as found in God. Jesus acknowledges our desire for the earthly good life – you want to fill your bellies, he says – but then he immediately reveals to us what should be 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 – bringing the world ever closer to the fulfillment of God’s purpose of complete reconciliation.

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. Even worse, in our society the message to work is often replaced with the encouragement to use lotteries and betting sites. Whether working for or winning the good life, either way it’s a very individualistic, “every man for himself”, sort of mentality. Fifty-two percent of Christians asked (Barna Study 2017) believe that the bible teaches us that “God helps those who help themselves.” There is nothing wrong with working hard to support yourself and your family. The problem comes when people forget that God is our provider, the foundation of all we are and do. The other problem is thinking that we must work to earn God’s approval. Jesus puts the brakes on this 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. Is the “work of God” *our* work *for* God striving to fulfill God’s purpose? Or is the “work of God” the work that *God* accomplishes? Well, it is both. To believe is the work of God...God’s work and our work with God.

It’s important to realize that the belief Jesus is talking about really is work. He is not speaking of belief as simply a thought that we have in our heads. Jesus uses the word belief as 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]. If we believe in justice but never do justice then there is no justice. If we believe in love but we don’t love then there is no love. We must live what we believe. Belief is active and it is accomplished with God.

The crowd hears Jesus say that the work of God is to believe in the one God sent so they challenge Jesus to show them a work that will get them to believe. This makes me shake my head. They just experienced the miracle of the feeding. They’d been following Jesus in the first place, because they’d seen the miracles of healing he’d been doing. Witnessing miracle after miracle, they simply want more

of the same instead of being able to expand the limits and recognize that Jesus is telling them something radically new. They apparently want a sign from the “good 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, are putting limits in place instead of being able to embrace something radically new. We might 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, he says. 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 live through the change of becoming the church together in a new space, this is an astounding and exciting opportunity for us to grow and to thrive according to God's ways in God's kingdom. God is doing a new thing with us and through us. Let's keep our eyes and minds open and imagine how we can be the bread of life for a hungry world.