

Pentecost 10; Proper 13B
Ephesians 4:1-16: John 6:24-35

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Problem in the Text

This morning we have heard about people who sought after Jesus – the very people who had been fed in the miraculous feast of bread and fish for the 5,000 on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. They, who had feasted until, as St. John’s account put it, “until they were satisfied,” got into their boats and chased Jesus and his disciples across the water to Capernaum. They wanted more. They wanted – well, that is the crux of this part of the story, isn’t it? What did they want?

What have the people come for? Why did they pack up everybody onto fishing boats and set out to find Jesus? When they finally found Jesus, they got into an odd conversation with him.

They asked Jesus “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.” In other words, the crowd was looking for Jesus so they might witness more miracles, that they might see a repeat of loaves and fishes. But when they received that miracle – it did not change them. It did not impact their lives beyond that it made them feel satisfied – it made them feel good. That was enough to send them into their boats and to seek Jesus, but not enough to change their hearts.

Jesus admonished the crowd by saying, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” But the crowd still did not understand – Jesus was not pleased that they had come all that way to find him. They understood that. But they picked up on the word “work” and pushed Jesus to know more about what they needed to DO to get more of Jesus and his ways – he was a prophet, right? The crowd asked, “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.”

Then they pushed Jesus to perform another sign – like the feeding of the 5,000. That is what they were after. 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;” Well, Jesus – how about some more bread? Will you make it rain down on us so we can live? That is what Moses did for us and it happened each day. Well Mr. Prophet, act more like Moses: get God to send manna to us and then tell us what God wants us to do. “They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” But that was not the bread God had planned to give them.

Problem in the World

What have we come to church for? What brought you through these doors the very first time you visited? What brought you this morning? Were you looking for a place to get married or to baptize your child? Did you seek healing for a parent, for yourself or for a relationship? Did you seek answers to the meaning of life? Were you looking for a miracle? Most likely, you were seeking something for your own personal reasons. You had a need and that is okay – it is the impulse that brought you here. But it is not what will keep you coming to church.

I am hosting a dear friend from Kenya this week. He has come to the USA to study for two years at the Virginia Seminary. I picked him up from the airport on Wednesday morning. As we drove toward Alexandria, he was noting the many ways that our region is so different from Nairobi. I am sure he will struggle a bit with culture shock – that always happens when you live in a different culture than your home. There is a saying he had heard and we talked about over lunch. It goes, “in Africa you may not always have food, but you will always have someone to sit with. In the West, you always have food but you may not always have someone to sit with.” Already he was noting the ways this saying appeared to have some truth in America.

We are a society that values individualism highly and it affects many aspects of our culture. There is the positive side of this cultural norm: we like to have children who are independent, who strive to achieve, who are entrepreneurial. We are a nation of independent and innovative thinkers. There are wonderful reasons to be proud and thankful to live in America and to enjoy the privileges of our culture. But there is the down side to this culture. We have people who are left adrift and homeless in our communities with mental health issues – who are cut off from family and in between the cracks of what government and charity can offer. If you are someone who, for whatever reason, cannot live independently, life can be tough here. We have violence in our communities that grows from a sense of dissatisfaction with life, aloneness, and easy access to guns. Think of some of the factors which have led to mass shootings or clusters of suicide in schools. There is a “shadow side” of our individualist culture. We prize individualism, but it does not feed our souls, our spiritual selves. A search for something more is what often brings people to church – especially those who are “unchurched,” who have grown up without a faith. Something about our human nature cries out for connectedness, for community, for meaning. In fact, we appear to be hard-wired to seek meaning. We hunger and thirst for it.

Grace in the Text

In today’s gospel reading, the manna the people craved was right in front of them – but it was a new kind and unexpected type of manna which God had sent to save his people. It was not the manna that God sent to his people in the wilderness. It was not bread that would feed 5,000 people. It was bread that would feed all of humanity. 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.” The crowd had asked Jesus, “What work are you performing?” The work he was performing was to bring God’s Holy Presence into their midst, to dwell with them and offer His Holiness to them. David Lose, who writes a weekly blog called “Dear Partner in Preaching,” writes that in John’s Gospel, “instead of giving us a miracle, God gives us God’s own self...the whole of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are summed up both succinctly and eloquently in the two words we hear when coming to the Table: “for you.” This is Christ’s body, given for you. This is Christ’s blood, shed for you.”ⁱ It is the bread of life which Jesus offers us: he offers us himself.

Grace in the World

The Gospel reading today is a caution to all who follow Jesus: We do not want to accept the bread and fish as simply a miracle meal as the crowd that chased after Jesus did. They wanted more miracle, as the Israelites wanted more manna and then asked for meat in the wilderness. The gift of the miracle meal did not change those hearts, did not fundamentally change who they were and whose they were. If you are new to Church, if you are just beginning to seek holiness and a relationship with God, or if you are new to your faith, you may have felt the wonder of feeling forgiven, of praying and sensing the Holy Spirit moving in your life. When you come to the altar, you may still be learning what it means to share in the Body and Blood of Christ during Communion. The work of this community at Grace Church is first and foremost to pass to the next generation of Christians to “believe in him whom God has sent.”

My prayer is that through worship, mission, fellowship, Bible Study, and the many activities we do as “church,” that we develop a sense of community and discipleship from a place of Thanksgiving and devotion. It is not enough to simply receive the bread of life each Sunday. It is not enough to just receive healing and forgiveness. Jesus wants the same thing for you that he wanted the crowd in Capernaum to understand: by eating the bread, we are being transformed into something new and holy. We are becoming part of Christ himself. In that sharing and being part of Christ’s body our very souls are nourished. We find the belonging and community that satisfies our thirst and hunger for meaning. Take and eat the body which was given for you. Take and drink the blood which was shed for you: let the meal transform your life.

Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-10-b-the-surprise-of-our-lives/> (July 27, 2015.)