

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

I am amazed at how in everyday life, because so often we anticipate rejection, judgment and criticism, we miss the language of love that does speak that loud. Maybe you have this feeling with certain members of your family. I have a friend who told me that for years, she could not even start talking with her brother, because as soon as she began talking, there was so much defensiveness that everything went off right away. She had a sense that everything she would say or do would be interpreted the wrong way. It was a very painful experience for her, as she tried desperately to connect, to be friendly and kind. But their family history was so complicated and emotions were so high, it took them years to find a way to communicate. Well, this week I thought about that because I think those kind of emotional and defensive reactions aren't only common between people, interestingly I think it's also true when it comes to the Bible, it's true also in the way we react when God tries to speak to us.

This is at least my experience as a preacher. As much as I believe as a fact that God is good and loves each one of us, I painfully realize how often it is that I open the Gospel, and, because of my own brokenness, I don't understand anything about what God is trying to say to me. Because deep down I don't feel that good about myself, I anticipate rejection, judgment and criticism, and I can't hear the language of love spoken by God in the mouth of Jesus. And I clearly almost missed it this week.

This is how I instinctively reacted when I heard Jesus telling me to “not strive for the bread that perishes but instead for the food that endures for eternal life”, I heard Jesus telling me to stop spending money on shopping or restaurants, but you know, do something serious in my daily life and occupations. And so I started writing this sermon. I was quite proud of myself actually. I had it all ready on Wednesday (which does not happen very often) and I thought I had it all figured out with this great stuff “Jesus wants us to work for the bread that does not perish” and so, we need to stop fooling around, but instead live with integrity, refuse compromises, tell the truth, work for the bread of social justice.

And then something happened on Thursday, after the newsletter went out about my departure, I re-read the whole thing, and I just thought: “This is bad”. Everything sounded so self-righteous and boring. I told myself: “This is my last sermon here at Grace” (not my last day – my last sermon), I can’t be all that preachy, all I want to do is to speak the language of love to this congregation that has meant so much too me.”

And that’s when I saw it. That’s when I realized that in this Gospel, Jesus is not mad at the way we live our lives or even critic, but he’s actually speaking the language of love – and I had almost missed it. I had almost failed to hear the language of love because I was so preoccupied with my judgment over my own life and its materialistic center of interests.

And so, after having given it more thoughts, I realized that when Jesus asks us to not strive for the bread that perishes but to look towards the bread of eternal life, Jesus is not asking us to trade our snacks and our shopping kart for a Bible or a Mass, because you know, we are such terrible and superficial people. I don’t think that Jesus is even asking us to shake ourselves up and do, at last, something meaningful with our lives. Jesus, today, is begging us to never go hungry again by receiving the bread of his love for us. Because our only job as Christians, is to hear the language of love and, as John puts it, *to believe in it*.

I recently went to the theater to see this amazing documentary: *Three identical strangers*. (If you haven’t seen it, I am sorry because this is going to ruin it for you!). This documentary talks about this dreadful experiment that was made in the sixties where some psychologists arranged with an orphanage to separate twins and triplets at birth, place them in different families of different socioeconomic levels and basically: follow up with the kids to see what would happen. The goal of the experiment was to determine what conditions our lives: is it nature or is it culture? What makes us who we are: is it in our DNA, or is it in our education? Well, it turned out at the beginning that the psychologists were surprised to realize so much was in our DNA, it seemed that we are who we are at birth and nothing can change that, it does not matter if you are raised by a faculty or a blue collar, you’ll basically have the same tastes, the same temper and even the same center of interests.

But then, the people who did the inquiry about this experiment and realized the documentary discovered something else. They realized that all those children were actually born from parents with mental illnesses and, actually, the real goal of this really dreadful experiment was to see how the children were going to make it in life in spite of their genetic heritage. Yet, here the response was even clearer. The difference was not in the nature (DNA) or culture (Education), it was in the nurture. The people who made it through life were those who had been loved, supported and encouraged. Now it's not a 100% of course. If your child does not turn out okay, it does not mean you made a mistake. But still, in this case the nurturing made a big difference.

I found this word "Nurturing" fascinating. There was no equivalent in French I could think of. So I looked it up and learned that in Latin it means both to feed and to cherish, a little bit like in English. And so I loved it because it talks about nourishment, actual food, and in the same time, it talks about care, about encouragement and support, it talks about developing trust and confidence. And it says so much about what parents do for their children: they give the bread for the stomachs, and they give the bread of love, the bread of life.

The bread that will help us to make it through life.

Jesus is not indifferent to our needs for the bread of this world, the bread that fill our stomachs. In the passage we have just heard, Jesus had just fed a crowd of 5000, and they weren't even asking! But he just did not want to send them on their way without them having something to eat. It reminded me of my grandmother when I was a teenager. Each time I rode the train to go and see her, even before she said hello, first she would ask me if I had had something to eat. I found it very annoying until I realized it was just her way to express her care for me. Yes, the bread for the stomachs is important when it comes to the people we love, yet Jesus this week asks us to be careful and to not miss the sign. This material bread is only a sign of the bread of his nurturing, the bread of his love, this bread of faith that will help us to make it through life. Because life is so much easier when we know we are loved first thing and so we don't always anticipate judgment and rejection.

And that's what we do on Sundays, right? We gather at the table, we receive the bread of his love for us so that we can make it though the week, in a world so full of rejection, judgment and criticism, or maybe in a world that we fill with our fear of rejection, judgment and criticism – so much that often we cannot hear the language of love that is spoken to us through many people and many things. When Jesus asks us to “not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life”, when he asks us to become less material and more spiritual, I guess this is what he wants to tell us. He does not ask us to become all intellectual and holy in a virtuous-ish kind of way. I think he invites us to see how the material world, all the things we see, and hear, and do and say are sacraments of his love, not only the bread “bread”, but all those little things our days are filled of.

This Tuesday, Jenni, Patrick and I are going with a group of young people to do Street Church, a ministry to the homeless downtown. They set up a table in a public park, celebrate on this table the Eucharist and then right after serve sandwiches on it. It talks in the same time about the bread of the life of the body and the bread of the life of the soul. Street Church is where I started my ministry as a priest and I remember I was amazed to realize how much more people were hungry to be nurtured than they were hungry for food (although they were hungry for food). Most of the homeless I met never asked for food first thing or it was just a way to engage a conversation, most of them just wanted someone to talk to. What they truly missed was not so much the physical bread. They missed the bread of love, the nurturing. So whether you'll be joining us or not, I hope this week and the days to come you can see and hear and touch the love of God as if it was as real and as available as the food on the table – because it is, actually. Real. And if you receive some extra, that you are willing to share it. Amen.