

For Christ's Sake! not What is it?

A sermon on Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 and John 6:24-35
for Sunday August 4, 2024

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

This morning's Gospel reading begins and overlaps with readings for the next few weeks,
all concerning this idea of Christ as the Bread of Life.

I don't know what takes other pastors are going to take with this,
or even if they'll use the John 6 readings where Jesus this Bread with his body,
and I hope I'm not stealing anyone's thunder nor contradicting them too much.

As with so much in scripture, there are many ways to interpret things.



Among scholars, largely based on their denominational teachings,
there is debate as to whether John 6
has nothing to do with Communion,
or everything to do with Communion.

Those wanting to limit the sacrament's significance,
or queasy over the body and blood-ness of it all,
tend to say that John 6 - the Bread of Life passage -
cannot have anything to do with the Lord's supper
due to it's relation to the feeding of the 5000 as opposed to the Last Supper event.

I find that rationale a bit flimsy and forced;
after all, John organized this into its written form after
it's evident from other sources that Christians were already
celebrating Communion with such language;
not to mention the centuries of Christian interpretation
that *have* taken John 6 to be about Communion,



But I do get it. It's weird - it has rich significance within 1st century Judaism - but it does sound weird.

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Even in Christ's day people were troubled by Jesus' words
when he gets very explicit about people eating his flesh and
drinking his blood,
many would-be disciples abandoned him,
because that sounds utterly disturbing
...wouldn't be the first time Jesus had his sanity questioned.



I bring up these discussions because as church-goers,
I know you're hearing echoes of Communion in this passage, and rightly so.
Now, this isn't the type of church that's picky
about how you understand the language of body and blood,
or even opt to replace it with more ... "palatable" terms,
like the Bread of Life for instance.



So I'm not going to focus on the question of "what is it?"
That's what the Israelites were asking in the Old Testament reading
- that's why they called the flaky stuff manna -
because manna means "what is it?"

Getting caught up on such details might make us overlook the treasures
that are here in this beginning bit of the John 6 Bread of Life discourse.
And that's what I'd really like to explore with you this morning.



Right before this passage was the Feeding of the 5000
and some walking on water.

Now Jesus is meeting up with the crowds.

This order is actually the same as the Sheep and Shepherds
reading from Mark we talked about last time I was up here.

Then the focus was on Jesus having compassion
on those who had raced ahead to find him.

In Mark, it says this compassion led him to take the time to teach the crowds.
Perhaps what we get from John today is what that teaching may have been.
It's interesting that Jesus comes across more cross than compassionate here.

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But these things are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Imagine how a parent might feel when their child insists on doing something stupid,
paying no attention to wise warnings.

Well, in this case,

Jesus is concerned that the crowds that have tracked him down did so out of ulterior motives. Not necessarily bad motives, but ones that don't see him as more than a guy who hands out bread. He has a bit of a back and forth with them. He remarks that they came because they wanted more bread, not because they understood the feeding miracle as a sign of who he is. People in the crowd
They still hoping they get bread, saying that then they will believe.

Have you ever had an experience like that?

One when it become so obvious that someone is just trying to use you?

I remember one incident in particular back in eighth grade earth science. Another student who had never said much to me before one day started being all friendly.

After a few minutes she asked me straight out if I'd help her cheat on the exam.

I flatly refused, and for some reason was never bothered by her again.

I don't think anyone particularly likes it when they're dehumanized
or objectified into the mere means to someone else's end.

As nice as it is to feel you can contribute something and be useful

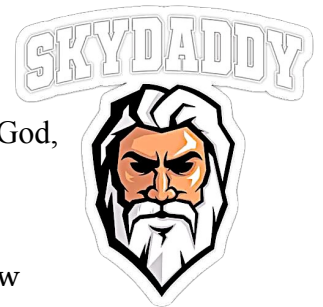
in whatever relationship or community it might be,

being valued *only* for what you have or can do instead of for who you are can be wearying.



It turns out that God isn't a fan of it either.

Sometimes people criticize Christians for believing in a Santa-God,
where prayer is basically giving a wish list to Sky-daddy.



Ever since ever it seems that there have been people who view
religion as a way to manipulate God,

just stay on his good side and maybe blessings will come your way.

It's all too often approached in terms of what what we can get out it.

Going along this route one might feel prayer and going to church and helping others are chores,
something to be dreaded, procrastinated, weaseled out of whenever possible.

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During the Middle Ages in Western Europe,
in the midst of plague, wars, famine, all manner of insecurity,
many common people couldn't or weren't allowed to,
have a "normal" religious life - going to church and partaking of the sacraments regularly.

For various reasons, some more reasonable than others,

the Church answered these realities with some interesting decisions.



For instance, Oracular Communion,

whereby if you could *see* the Communion elements

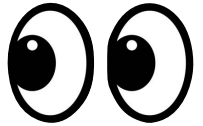
that was just as good as actually partaking of them in the sacrament.

They also came up with requirements

like partaking of Communion at least once a year.

These were intended, in theory,

to give people a way to engage ritually with their faith
when doing things "normally" was out of the question.



It was never meant to replace the ideal.

Yet eventually some started to see such things as answering

"what's the minimum can I get away with?"

instead of "what can I do?"

And the latter is the one we want - what can we do to live out our faith in our circumstances.

That other question - the "what can we get away with?"

doesn't do much to foster a relationship with God.

It fosters the kind of relationship you have with someone

you avoid spending time with or even talking to.

It fosters the question of whether or not it was ever God that you wanted in the first place.

That's what Jesus is telling these folks.

He sees and understands their hearts, and wants them to get their priorities straight.

He wants them to understand that following Jesus means cultivating a relationship with him.

Jesus stresses that the bread they ought to be looking for actually him himself.

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That he is the one that can completely and permanently satisfy their deepest hungers.

Jesus will go on to contrast the manna that sustained the ancient Israelites

with this Bread of Heaven highlighting this exact point.

I had our worship leader add on verses 19-21 of Exodus 16

to also highlight this difference.

The Old Testament manna was not the stuff of eternal life.

In fact, it was highly perishable.

They had to gather it every day and not leave any left over,

because, as those who disobeyed found it,

old manna stinks and gets wormy.

Much as things usually decay when they die.

Rather importantly, Jesus's body was an exception to that rule.

And Jesus tells us that the Bread of Life He provides, and that He is, grants eternal life and eternal satisfaction.

Because what it is that people then and yet today crave ultimately, whether or not they recognize it, is relationship with God.

Yet, clearly in this passage, Jesus isn't forcing the relationship.

He's pointing out where their focus is - one wonders if they even had realized.

He's pointing to where their focus could be,

trying to open people to their own hearts

and recognize if there is something about God that they want in their lives,

something that makes material needs seem but a shadow of.

Jesus certainly does care about those material needs and wants us to help to those needs of others -

he had given 5000 people bread fish just a chapter back.

Maybe that's a place to start, but today's Gospel invites us to something more, something eternal;

it's an invitation to love Him, to stand in awe of Him, for His own sake.



**If you haven't got the
of Life ...**



You're



*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*