

Gospel Reading: John 6:24-35

The Bread of Life

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Sometimes people will do anything to just survive ... even going so far as being baptized into the Christian church. Christian missionaries were once accused of using basic survival needs ... especially hunger ... as a means of converting people to Christianity. Believe me ... if the choice is food and conversion versus no food at all ... well, the choice to a starving person is easy.

Such people were nicknamed "Rice Christians" ... people who converted to Christianity out of a need for survival, rather than from a genuine desire to embrace the Christian faith. The novel by A. J. Cronin, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, centers on "Rice Christians" in China. A young Catholic priest is being sent to a remote mission in rural China to replace the retiring priest.

It seems that the official reports about the mission are just amazing. The reports indicate that in a very short time a church and several buildings were built, with multitudes of Chinese being converted and baptized. But in reality, when the new priest arrives, he finds an empty community ... with only one little shack left standing ... and no converts. It seems that these so-called new Christians had only come into community for what was offered to them ... they had received food as long as they agreed to help the first priest build the community and then be baptized and converted to Christianity. But when that first priest left ... so did the people ... because the church, to them, was nothing but a place for a handout ... a place to eat and survive.

Their conversion to Jesus Christ meant absolutely nothing to them. "Rice Christians" however, aren't the invention of 19th and 20th Century missionaries. In reality ... they have existed throughout the centuries. Belief in God has often been tied to physical survival.

In the time of Moses ... as we heard in our Psalter reading ... the people cried out for food and manna came from the skies ... and as long as they were fed, it seems the Hebrew people would follow Moses and his God. And if we're honest about it ... the same can be said today about the 21st Century Christian church. We, too, sometimes offer manna ... all kinds of enticements to attract people to Christianity ... from full service workout facilities to lavishly catered weekly meals.

It seems that Jesus, as you will soon hear, experienced the same phenomena on the banks of the Sea of Galilee ... when a large group of people ... many who had feasted the night before on loaves and fishes ... catch back up with Jesus. But what Christ is actually offering them this time ... and us ... is something much more than just bread and fish ... he's offering something much more lasting.

There's just one problem for us ... it's hard to develop a taste for the kind of bread Christ wants us to have ... we prefer this kind of bread (LOAF OF BREAD) ... we want as much as we can get ... including all the stuff that goes with it in this world ... except this kind of bread goes stale ... and mold grows on it. It doesn't last.

Christ is offering us a different kind of bread ... a bread we might have a hard time accepting. Listen with your heart to the words of our Savior from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, verses 24-35.

24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

26 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.

27 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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God ... that you believe in him whom he has sent."

30 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?"

31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's a matter of survival for some people ... just getting enough to eat. Hunger and poverty are at the top of the list of the worst evils in the world. And there was plenty of both to go around in the time of Jesus.

Palestine was an agrarian land ... probably 90 percent of the people lived by farming the land.

They barely eked out an existence ... many did not. Some of the "did nots" found themselves on a hillside one afternoon listening to an itinerant preacher talking to them about the poor and the meek ... he sounded good enough so that most of them ... actually about 5,000 ... hung around to hear some more. They didn't know it ... but he was feeding them ... feeding them the Word.

But it was the sideshow that really hooked them ... when he filled their bellies with all the fish and bread they could eat ... how'd he do that? He only had five fish and two loaves of bread. Now you have to admit it ... If you don't have much ... if you're hungry all the time ... that's a pretty cool trick. One worth watching again.

Now before they know it ... that preacher ... some were probably calling him a magician ... jumps into a boat with his buddies and heads across the lake. That's not fair. They want more. So they head after him ... catching up with him the next morning on the other side of the lake. They want to know why he left them.

They're hungry again ... they want some more of that good food. It's time for Jesus to pull some more bread and fish out of his hat. That's when he offers them some more bread ... but not the kind they were expecting. He's not offering them a fresh warm loaf to take away the hunger pangs ... he offers them some bread that surely must be loaded with tons of preservatives ... because he says it will last forever.

So they ask him ... "How do we get a hold of this kind of bread?" And Jesus gives them the recipe for it ... it's really quite simple ... he just tells them ... "Believe in me." "Believe in you? Is that it? Is that all I have to do to get your "last forever" bread. Why that's easy ... "

"Hey ... wait a minute ... I'm not sure I can do that ... how can I really believe in you? Before I can do that ... you gotta prove yourself to me ... do some other kind of trick like you did last night with the fish and loaves ... you know ... maybe like walking across a swimming pool or something."

The people want another sign ... another miracle ... a little more proof ... just like their ancestors did in the wilderness when Moses was trying to convince them to follow God to the promised land. Seems some things never change. They just don't get it.

They want the kind of bread to fill their bellies ... and as long as Jesus can keep right on producing it ... they'll keep right on following him ... like "Rice Christians ... eating their fill ... but never truly tasting the bread of life he really wants them to have. The bread they seek is bread that will only last for today ... Christ is offering them something way better ... and they ... like us ... don't seem to want to take it.

It's not that Jesus isn't concerned for their physical well being ... but the signs he shows them were just that ... signs that point to the very heart of God's love for them ... God's grace ... God's redemption ... God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Now that's a real loaf of bread!

Sometimes the church in our day ... and that includes us and a whole lot of other denominations ... gets so wrapped up in worrying about our numbers ... so consumed that the church is shrinking

... that we will do and offer anything to make our church more attractive to people ... in other words ... we market it to the general public and hope something we do or offer will attract someone here. Now that's okay ... to a point. But let me share something with you that I read this week that really hit home with me.

Maybe it will with you, too. Writing in *Feasting on the Word*, Benjamin Sparks, challenges us by saying: "Too often, we forget how to pursue what really matters. We are accustomed to inviting people into the community of faith for all the wrong reasons for the "right" kind of worship; for political engagement on behalf of the poor and downtrodden; for the sake of a Christian America; for a strong youth and family ministry; for the opportunity to practice mission in a downtown location, or to go on mission trips to Africa or Central America. Yet what we have to offer," he says, "in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ—first and foremost is "soul food," which lasts forever and does not change the changing circumstances of the church or the world."

Then Sparks hit me between the eyes with these words ... "We North American Christians have preached a broken, truncated gospel. We have been good marketers rather than true witnesses. We have bought into a culture that rewards consumers and addresses their needs, instead of proclaiming a gospel that offers us faith in the only begotten Son, who gave his life for the sins of the world—and who is lifted up so that all who believe in him have everlasting life. He is the real bread of life. Those who come to him will never be hungry, and those who put their trust in him will never thirst." (Year B, Vol. 3, p. 310)

Now I don't believe Sparks is saying that we shouldn't meet the needs of our neighbors ... because just like Jesus who offered a hillside of hungry people all the food they could eat ... we, too, are called to feed the hungry ... to tend the sheep who come our way. That's part of doing our work and mission. But if we just stop there ... and become satisfied with our efforts because people like what we're doing ... what we're offering ... what we're feeding them ... even if our numbers begin to grow ... then we might as well close our doors ... because we will have actually failed as disciples of Christ.

Because like Christ ... we must be willing to offer people who come through our doors something that will satisfy far more than just their physical needs ... and that's the "soul food" Sparks was talking about. We've got to proclaim Jesus Christ ... we've got to teach Jesus Christ ... we've got to tell the story over and over and over until that bread of life Christ is offering us becomes even more real ... and far more important to our spiritual lives and the lives of others ... than that loaf of bread you pick up at Kroger's or Publix bakery.

The story we want to share begins here. It is here at this table that we come ... at Christ's invitation ... to taste that bread of life. It is here that we acknowledge something far beyond our mortal understanding ... Christ tells us that all we have to do to receive the bread of life ... is to believe in him.

It's really that simple ... and it's really that hard. In our hearts we want to say yes ... in our minds ... sometimes we doubt. That's why we keep coming back here ... time and time again ... not just to have a taste of earthly bread mixed in with the flavor of grape juice ... but to ponder the mystery and love and the grace of Jesus Christ ... and taste the bread of life.

So today ... Christ's invitation is being offered to you. If you have already accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior ... then I ask you to recommit yourself to his claim on your life ... to remember your baptism ... to share in the bread of Life ... to dwell in the goodness of God's grace and fully live into it.

And if you have been searching for something ... maybe your world is falling apart around you ... you may feel lost and alone ... you might have reached the end of your rope and you just walked in here as a last resort ... well, we as a church will reach out to you ... we will do everything in our power to help you ... we might have what you are looking for. . . maybe we can assist you with food ... or a MARTA token ... or point you in the right direction ... or just sit with you and be a listening presence in your life ... we will stand with you ... but our power is limited ... there is only so much that we can do ... but that's not the case with Jesus Christ.

Because Christ is here ... now ... with you. Maybe you've never accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior ... if not ... then I now invite you to do so ... to share in this grace-filled moment ... to have some of the real soul food that will last forever ... that will feed you in ways that you will never imagine ... as you begin a journey that will change you forever. For that is what this place ... this church ... is really about ... sharing the Bread of Life that only Christ provides.

Let us pray:

Now to your table spread we come each one in faith

That you alone provide the words of life and death;

In wine and bread, in promised food,

we find Your loving heart, O God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.