

“The True Bread from Heaven”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 2, 2009

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John 6:24-35

When I was growing up, my grandmother lived in St. Louis. She had been a nurse and a pastor’s wife but was widowed at a relatively young age, meaning that she was a pretty independent women, relying mostly on her faith and herself. Whenever we visited, which was usually a couple of times each summer, we would go out to dinner at either the neighborhood German restaurant or the local Italian restaurant. Despite her many strong points, my Grandma was neither an enthusiastic nor an accomplished cook.

But without fail, one time in the course of every visit, we would eat dinner at my Grandma’s house. I remember one time when we were served fried squirrel which – considering that my brothers and me had just returned from playing in the neighborhood park – was a little hard to stomach. More than once, we sat down at the table, without a clue to what we were actually about to eat, but having been warned that under no circumstances were we to offend Grandma and to ask what it was.

We think of Jesus was as accomplished at many different areas, but he seemingly was not very good at getting away from the crowds that followed him. Even midnight lake crossings, going off to pray in barren places and taking the less-traveled roads usually proved ineffective. His followers were far too intrigued by his words, far too entranced by the “signs and wonders” that they witnessed, to let him go, even when Jesus seemed to drop a not-too-subtle hint that he wanted to be alone. Then again, being alone likely was not Jesus’ intention at all. Instead, he was in the business of building a community: not a neighborhood or town like the communities that we usually imagine, but a mobile, changing community of disciples. People come and go – gathered then dispersed – some doubt and some believe; some need help and some can help.

Many of the followers that found Jesus that day likely were among the five-thousand that had been miraculously fed the previous day. They had been hungry and Jesus had met their needs. Even better, Jesus had done so by empowering the twelve disciples to be food providers themselves. All of

this, and there had been leftovers, twelve full baskets that were collected at the end of the meal.

As the people in the crowds that day knew, the food that the Hebrews ate in the wilderness was called “manna.” Each day before dawn, it would mysteriously appear and then, before the sun reached its height in the sky, it would disappear with equal ambiguity. It was like nothing they had seen before. The Hebrews were each instructed to gather just as much as they needed – their daily bread – and no more. Each morning, manna was on the menu; and all they had to do was go out and get it.

But what was it? The word itself, “manna” is a Hebrew pun on “mah hu” which means, “what it is?” Where it came from was clear, it was from God in heaven, but what it was remained a mystery to the Hebrews.¹ And so, the very thing that gave them sustenance – their daily bread – was an unknown. “What’s for breakfast?” a Hebrew child might ask a Hebrew parent? A divine miracle? A gift from God? Yes, honey, but honestly, “I don’t know.”

In the Gospels, there is similar question often asked about what God has sent from heaven: not “what is it?” but “who is he?” Matthew, Mark and Luke answer this question through parables and stories that reveal Jesus as the anointed one, the messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God. Each of these writers offers a steady disclosure of Jesus’ identity – often shrouded in mystery. “Who is this,” the people wonder, that has authority even over evil spirits?” “Who is this,” the Jewish leaders demand, that heals people even on the Sabbath? “Who is this,” the disciples ask, that the wind and the waves obey him?

But John’s Gospel is different. Instead of allowing everyone to keep wondering “who is this?” Jesus tells them who he is. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” he tells them. “I am the good shepherd and I know my sheep by name.” “I am the living water, and all those who drink of me will never thirst again.”

Jesus wanted those who were seeking him to find him, but he also wanted them to seek him for the right reasons. The signs and wonders helped the people to locate him, but he had more to show them, more to tell

¹ Gail Ramshaw, “Living by the Word” in *Christian Century*, July 28, 2009

them, and more to share with them. There was more than bread available to them – something more lasting and more significant.

On Friday night, as part of the youth “Backyard Mission” trip, we watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. This is the third installment of the Harrison Ford archeologist/adventurer series, where Indie searches for the Holy Grail. At the same time, though, he is searching for his father – played by Sean Connery – who has also been seeking the Grail. Now, both of them are racing against the clock – overcoming the usual pitfalls and rats and snakes – always snakes – but also an assortment of spies, bandits, rouge characters and German Nazis.

I’ll admit that my eyes were not open for the entire movie; not after working in the sun during the day and eating almost all of an obscenely large burger and fries at the Hard Rock Café. Still, I was awake long enough to follow the story; plus, a couple of the kids knew the lines so well that they could easily get me caught up. The Holy Grail, while it would have been the archeological find of a lifetime, reportedly also had magical healing powers and held the promise of eternal life for whoever drank from it. The other seekers wanted it for personal immortality, but after the senior Dr. Jones was injured, Indie wanted the Holy Grail not just for the fame and fortune it would bring him, but to bring healing to his ailing father and their fractured relationship.

Jesus says to the crowds that have been seeking him: “You look for me because you do not know who I am.” (v. 26) Their motivation for seeking shows a lack of faith; a lack of imagination about God who has been incarnated in Christ; and therefore not a savior who will be a mighty king, but one who will teach them about a different kind of kingdom. Faith in John’s gospel is tied to the stuff of this life – shepherds and flocks, vines and branches, bread and water – all of which is present in the here and now.²

It’s a great thing to be a spiritual seeker, but the motivations behind our searching for Jesus do make a difference. Is it because we simply want food for ourselves; or prestige and possessions? Or, instead, do we seek “soul” food? Do we believe the good news even if it does not lead directly to our own prosperity and personal happiness?³ Are we willing to – after we

² William Willimon in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

³ O Benjamin Sparks in *Feasting on the Word*.

have found Jesus – put others ahead of us? Are we willing to make room at the table for strangers and even enemies who hunger and thirst; trusting God that there will be enough for everyone?

Jesus, the true bread from heaven, reminds those who seek him that God should not be remembered only as the One who gave manna to the Hebrews in the wilderness, but as the One who is giving us our daily soul food. Jesus is continually revealed to those who are not searching only to have their personal needs met: through stable finances, through lively entertainment, or even through a healthy, active church. The answer to our question, “who is this?” comes when we can see Jesus revealing to us the heart and soul of God who has and is still giving Christ to us. This is the God of limitless compassion and continual invitation. This is the God whose table set before us that reminds us of the significance of self-sacrifice. This is the God who searches us and knows us; demonstrating both the importance of our seeking as well as the miracle of being found.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ, the true bread from heaven, our daily manna which gives us our strength and our hope. AMEN.