

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 4, 2024 – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:24-35
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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." Jesus makes some promises that sound extravagant. "Never be hungry ... never be thirsty." What do these promises mean? How can we believe them?

Hunger and thirst. It is clear to me from Jesus' teaching and his behavior that he is deeply concerned about those who lack the basic necessities of human life. This message is an essential part of the ancient Jewish scripture that Jesus knew well, not something new coming from Jesus. Repeatedly we hear the Old Testament prophets speak for God, giving clear direction that those who love the Lord must provide for people in need. Jesus taught this message and demonstrated this message during his ministry.

You may remember that last week our lesson from John's Gospel (John 6:1-21) described a miracle that Jesus performed, the feeding of the five thousand. A large crowd of people had followed Jesus because he had been healing the sick. He looked at all the people and said to his disciples, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' ... Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'" "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." The loaves and fish fed the large crowd, with twelve baskets of food left over, more than Jesus had started with.

This account of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand focuses on Jesus and the abundance which he offered the people gathered around him. Some Christians cannot accept the literal truth of the miracles recorded in the New Testament. You may be one of them. A "non-miraculous" explanation of the feeding of the five thousand is that all the people there were moved to do what the boy did, to share what they had with others. The result was that there was more than enough for everyone. I say "non-miraculous" in quotes. Wouldn't it be a miracle today if all the followers of Jesus generously shared what we have to provide food, clean water, and medical help for our brothers and sisters in Christ here and around the world? This is a miracle that can happen here and now, in my life and your life and in the life of Christian churches, if we are willing to be miracle workers in Jesus' name.

Jesus promised his followers that they would never be hungry or thirsty. Of course, this isn't literally true, is it? Many people who love the Lord experience great physical hunger and thirst, some die from lack of food and water. Jesus must mean something beyond the physical food and water that sustain our human bodies. To answer the question of what Jesus means, I suggest we think of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6.).

God's righteousness is about truth and fairness. In the Bible, scales that measure weights can be described as "righteous" if they are rightly balanced, if they weigh "true." Righteousness conveys the sense of balance in life, of equity. When God has given us blessings, we are meant to share them with others. That is part of what righteousness means. Scripture conveys the idea of God's righteousness in the word "*shalom*," a vision of

peace and harmony, of completeness and welfare, where all have what they need. Just as in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

How might we relate to this teaching of the Bible? There is a verse from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah that asks searching questions as applicable to our lives today as they always have been. God is speaking to God's people and says: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live" (Isaiah 55:2a and 3a).

The second part of this quote informs the first part. God invites us to approach God and listen to God for a reason, "so that [we] may live." Prophets in scripture often put before the people a choice – to choose life or to choose death. God always desires us to choose life. And that's what is behind these questions. In them, we are invited to freedom and to more abundant life. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?" In other words, why do you give the resources you have for things which are not essential for life or support life? Living, as we do, in a consumer culture where we are bombarded with temptations to spend our money on what we don't really need, this is a powerful question. Do we spend what we have on what we truly need and perhaps waste money on what we don't need? We might look back at our expenditures over the last week or month and find out. If we find that we waste money, what are the consequences of that? Might we allocate the wasted money to what we really need instead? Are we neglecting to give money to people or organizations who might make better use of our money? If so, are we failing to live according to our own best values?

God also asks, "Why do you spend your labor for that which does not satisfy?" I see this question as related to time management. Do we spend our precious resource of time on labor/occupations that do not sustain our lives and the lives of others? This does not mean "all work and no play." God commands our Sabbath rest, after all. But what would we learn if we examined our use of time over the past days or weeks? Of course, we spend a great deal of time doing what we must do – our jobs and occupations, what needs to be done to keep our families, homes, and bodies going on a good course. What else do we do? Does what we do for leisure "satisfy," that is, does it provide us with rest for our bodies, minds, and spirits? Do we spend some of our time and labor to support the church or other organizations that help people? Or do we waste our labor and our time? At the end of the day do we often find that we haven't found time for what is good for us and for others, but we have found time for what is unnecessary and unfulfilling? For instance, did we have time to Google half a dozen things but no time for prayer? Did we choose life as we used the minutes and hours of our lives?

Perhaps these challenges don't especially "speak to your condition." One message of scripture does speak to all of us: Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." We believe that Jesus is the Bread of Life. The bread of the Eucharist is a sign of God's love for us. And it is food for our souls that nourishes us so that we may love God and love God's other children as God loves us all. May we receive the blessing of the Bread of Life today and, filled with God's love, go out into the world to share our blessings and our love with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.