

Sunday July 18th, 2021

PRAYER: Christ Jesus, Lord of the feast, you call us to the table where we are nourished by love. Like the bread and fish never exhausted, your love is never diminished by our need. For abundant provisions, we give you thanks. For your inexpressible gift, we praise you. For love that feeds our souls, we offer you access to our deepest heart. Give us, as you have given yourself, to the world in love. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of unfailing mercy, we acknowledge Christ as the unshakable foundation of our lives. His constant love, his insistent call, and his enduring presence among us, quell our anxiety and free us to bear his light into the darkest corners of our world. Yet as much as we believe this, we are reluctant to be used by Christ as stones lay upon the foundation of his life. We do not sacrifice as he did. We reserve ourselves, as if some more important task will soon claim us. And daily we reject your claim upon us as your royal and chosen people. O God, forgive our reluctance to be your servants, and declare again and again your words of mercy until we finally and totally believe. Amen.

ASSURANCE: God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and given us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Let us give praise to God, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for your selves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God, one of the truths of this world is that you have created us to depend on one another. One of the most beautiful ways that you care for us is to give us relationships that nurture and care for us in our times of need. You empower us to join our strength and intellect and resources to accomplish great projects that benefit whole communities and even the world. However, we also are fully aware that should we not work together, progress in justice and mercy are hampered, and the very fabric of society can be torn to pieces. Everywhere we turn we see evidence of our failure to let you build unity among us. Instead of being of one mind and one body as Christ desires, we are fractured into gangs, denominations, ethnicities, nationalities, ideologies and even religions. We have failed at being one family, but sadly we have excelled at being us and them.

O God, if only our faith were as great as your trust! But our record, at best has been spotty. Instead of depending on others to work for the good of all, we have simply neglected them. Instead of learning from previous generations, we have simply repeated their mistakes. Instead of distributing your gifts according to need, we have simply hoarded everything. For this betrayal of you and your will, we ask for your forgiveness. Not only have we betrayed you collectively as a community but we have also betrayed you as individuals.

We love to pray “your Kingdom Come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, but they are often empty words. Our efforts have directed more to blocking your kingdom’s advance than by speeding it forward. We know the power of lies, but we spread gossip anyway. We know the power of silence in the face of injustice to scar, but we have left the truth unspoken. We know the power of prejudice to distort, yet we have let bigotry go unchallenged.

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We know the power of selfishness to seduce, yet we let its grip go untested. True, we have not committed all the evils we deplore, but neither have we condemned them. We choose to be eye-winkers rather than whistle-blowers: to play it safe rather than straight; to promote harmony rather than justice; to heed the will of our neighbours rather than the word of the Lord.

We pray for your mercy, O Lord, for having squandered our opportunities for bringing your rule to earth. And we pray not only for the release of our neighbours from the influence of our example, but for our own transformation: that, henceforth, when they do as we do, they will also be doing as we say; and that we and they might work together to turn your gifts into the foundation of that better world for which we pray.

BENEDICTION: O Lord, as we go forth to meditate on the story of the loaves and fishes, let us not dwell on how much Jesus was able to do with so little. Neither let us dwell on how little we do with so much. Dismiss us, instead, with the desire to put ourselves, as Jesus did, wholly at your bidding. Amen.

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John 6:24-35
“I Want a Slice”

As many of you know, I love jokes and humour, and use copious amounts in my preaching, but I do agree that when a story is actually true, it is even funnier. Such is the case of a little story I stumbled across that I have since confirmed is actually true. In 1993 the FBI was investigating a medical service provider that specialized in psychiatric care. Specifically, they were looking into accusations of medical insurance fraud.

In a coordinated raid, agents were sent to a few institutions owned by the same company, on the same day, to go through billing records. In the Southwood Psychiatric Hospital in Chula Vista California, the sheer volume of records meant the agents ended up staying longer than expected to complete their work. As you can imagine, the agents had worked up quite an appetite, and the agent in charge called a nearby pizza parlor to order food for his investigation team.

The following is the actual telephone conversation that occurred between the agent and the pizza parlor as told by the agent. AGENT: Hello. I'd like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda. PIZZA MAN: And where would you like them delivered? A: We're over at the psychiatric hospital. PM: The Psychiatric hospital? A: That's right. I'm an FBI agent. PM: You're an FBI agent? A: That's correct. Just about everybody here is.

PM: And you're at the psychiatric hospital? That's correct. And make sure you don't go through the front doors. We have them locked. You'll have to go around to the back service entrance to deliver the pizzas. PM: And you say you're all FBI agents? A: That's right. We've been here all day and we're starving. PM: How are you going to pay for all this? A: I have my checkbook right here.

PM: And you're all FBI agents? A: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizza and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked. PM: I don't think so. *Click* (www.guy-sports.com) I should tell you that the agents eventually got their pizza, but only after an agent physically went to the pizza parlor and ordered in person and picked the food up.

On some level, all of us know what it is like to be hungry. Maybe not like our brethren in poorer countries certainly, but all of us have experienced at some point the “grumbles in our tumblies” as Winnie the Pooh says. We are as Michael Marsh states, “hungry people in a hungry world.” Everyone is looking for something that will sustain and nourish life. We are all on the hunt for bread. We are all looking for satisfaction.

Just to clarify; the problem lies not with the fact that we are hungry. The human condition inherently has within it the desire to be filled, or satiated. If we did not experience hunger, we would not eat and therefore would starve to death. It is also true perhaps that God made us this way so we would always be searching for something satisfying. The problem therefore is not our hunger, it never has been. The problem is the kind of bread we seek to satisfy that hunger. And lest you miss this broader point, I am not just talking about physical hunger. Hunger can manifest in many forms.

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I am talking about the empty, aching, urgency that drives us to search. Search for anything that makes us, at least temporarily, feel filled or fulfilled. And there is a lot of different kinds of bread out there advertising itself as satisfaction for our bodies and souls. All around us the temptation whispers to us, “If only I had this or that.” If only I had a bigger house, a fancier car, a fuller back account, the love of that person, or whatever, my life would be complete, or whole.

Really? Remember the old adage, “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.” Maybe the rock band The Rolling Stones are more astute than I originally gave them credit for. For Mick Jagger screams out in one of their songs, “I can’t get no satisfaction”. I think this song speaks for the vast majority of people in this world, regardless of gender, age, culture, race or creed. “We can’t get no satisfaction”.

And isn’t it puzzling that in a world so full of all kinds of different breads, different things promising to satisfy, so many people remain hungry. I guess that tells us something about the nature of our appetites, doesn’t it? If after I try to satisfy my hunger, I end up being hungry again, it is a sign that whatever bread I am seeking cannot truly give real life to me. It is a perishable bread that sustains a perishable life. We are therefore left seeking more.

I will state the obvious conclusion then; not all bread is life giving. Some is actually life destroying. If we want to know the true value of a bread, we have to look beyond its nutritional value. We have to ask serious questions like; where does it come from, or what’s in it? Who offers it to us, and how do we get it? These are all the questions Jesus is raising in our gospel lesson today. This passage occurs the very next day after Jesus fed the multitude.

Remember that wow event? We cannot, nor should we underestimate the impact this event had on the people who participated in the buffet on the hill. The draw on the people’s attention to Jesus was enhanced multifold. Today we read that Jesus and his disciples have crossed back over the lake, (The story of Jesus walking on the water occurs in this night time crossing) and remember it’s not a huge lake, so the crowds hurried through the night to catch up with them.

The very first question out of the crowds’ lips is an odd one, “Teacher, how (actually it is better rendered as when) did you get here?” Remember the last they saw of Jesus he was heading off into the hills alone and now he is in a boat with his disciples. Jesus sees the crowd’s true purpose in coming to him. Yesterday, they enjoyed a bountiful meal, and now the crowd feared they missed breakfast.

The crowd who was fed until they could eat no more, were by morning, hungry once again. They wanted more of the loaves and fishes to get them through the next few hours. Then they would need more food and so on and so on. The crowd who experienced this great miracle, could not see beyond the fish and loaves. They were only interested in their own appetites, and Jesus knew it. The people only cared about their bellies, while Jesus is concerned about their lives.

The people cared about the here and now, and Jesus cared about the eternal. Jesus urges them to stop seeking perishable things, and instead to seek eternal life. So, they ask, “What does God want us to do?” Jesus replies, “Believe in the one he sent.” Namely, believe in Jesus. Seems straight forward enough.

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Believe in the one who multiplied the loaves and fishes, who healed so many and exorcised the demons. So simple, but so hard. Instead of believing, what do they do? They ask for another miracle. Give us manna from heaven like Moses did in his time. Unbelievable the audacity of the crowd. How many miracles does it take to convince them of who Jesus is? Jesus didn't come to dispense coffee and pastries. The fish and loaves are not the end game of Jesus' ministry. There are bigger stakes here than mere food.

So, Jesus tries to correct their thinking, reminding them that it was God who provided, not Moses; but do you see that the mention of manna means they still only care about their bellies. Jesus goes on to explain that true bread, eternal life, can only come from God. Manna, the loaves and fishes, are but mere signs of something more wonderful that is being offered. You see the people want to be fed with bread, Jesus wants to feed them with God.

So much of what the crowd sought was perishable. So much of what we seek, or what we believe to be important in life is perishable. Food ultimately decays, metal rusts, and equipment wears out. I actually came across a report a week ago that in North America, 30% of the food that is produced in this country never makes it to our mouths. Truck loads daily, of perfectly fine food, goes straight to landfills.

The difference between an apple going home with us, and going to the landfill can be as simple as a small bruise or blemish. The blemished apple is perfectly edible and safe but we demand perfection. Many of the best before dates are arbitrary, placed on products so we throw them out while still useful, and go and buy replacements. So why do we so anxiously hoard and search for something so plentiful and yet so perishable?

Jesus expands on this thought at length in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they are safe from thieves. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be."

Also, he says, "So I tell you, don't worry about everyday life-whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes. Doesn't life consist of more than food or clothing?" As truthful as we believe these words to be, we still find ourselves fretting a great deal about finite things. I suspect some of you right now are thinking about what you will have for lunch when the service is over. Will it be Swiss Chalet, or sandwiches at home? I know the kids among us will be wondering, what ice cream is in the freezer for us today?

The powerful question behind all of this is simply this, why do you seek Jesus out? Why do you come to hear about him, and from him? Why worship him? What are you really seeking? At least at some level, a number of us are hungry for finite things, and we hope our devotion to Jesus will encourage him to grant us bread, or manna from heaven. Like the old folk song, "O Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz."

Maybe we aren't so crass, but maybe we are just as insatiable in our demands. Lord, please give me a better paying job and I will be satisfied.

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Lord, if you would just heal me or my love one, I will be satisfied. Lord, my neighbour says you gave him a lottery win, how about me? Jesus urges us to seek eternal things, but we are a fickle bunch. We are fair weather friends of Jesus. As long as we get what we want, we will follow him. Isn't it crass of us to ever think of Jesus as a sort of cosmic ATM.?

If only I have the right code or pin number, Jesus will give me what I want. That's why on the internet, and in the newspapers and in books, there are people who claim to know the secret prayers, or rituals, that can't miss in getting Jesus to dispense some goodies to us. If we treat Jesus like that, our faith is not based on a relationship, but on a negotiation, or worse, it is based on manipulation.

Later on in this chapter, we read that many disciples turned from following Jesus. Jesus' call to abundant living was not what their selfish minds and hearts wanted. Jesus offered the "bread of life" and they wanted no part of it. The value of the Kingdom of God in their minds, laid in what God in Christ would do to meet their physical needs. But the food that endures is Jesus. He is the bread that is broken and distributed for the life of the world.

Jesus is the bread that is eaten, and yet the supply is never exhausted. When we believe in Jesus, which means ingesting or taking him into our lives, we live differently. We see ourselves and others, and our circumstances; not as problems to be overcome. We trust the silence of prayer rather than words of argument. We choose love and forgiveness, rather than anger and retribution. We relate to others with vulnerability and sincerity, instead of superficiality and defensiveness.

When we partake of the bread of life, we listen to God's voice rather than our own. Ultimately, we seek life rather than death. The loaves and fishes did not sustain the crowd for very long. The manna in the wilderness had to be sent every day, except the Sabbath, because it spoiled. I don't care how good your lunch will be today, you will need to eat again. So why do we expend so much of ourselves worrying if we can get our next meal?

The answer to that question is as clear as the nose on our faces. We don't trust God in Christ. We do not trust his word, his promises, and his love. Despite our declared convictions, our actions and our attitudes give us away and reveal the truth. We sing that Jesus is our Blessed Assurance all the while worrying about our next meal, our bank accounts, our social status or the influence we have on others.

The only blessed assurance we actually believe in is what perishable bread I can cling to. We think it is easier to trust ourselves, or others rather than Jesus. In 1860, a huge crowd of spectators crowded along the edge of the Niagara Gorge to witness an incredible act of bravery. The famous tightrope walker Blondin had stretched a 1,000-foot tightrope, across the gorge at a height of 160 feet above the raging water.

Not only did Blondin successfully walk across the wire and back again; he then proceeded to push a wheelbarrow across and back again. The crowd was amazed at his daring but one little boy was particularly taken with Blondin's act. Blondin noticed him and said, "Do you believe I could take a person across in the wheelbarrow without falling?" The young lad replied, "Yes, sir, I really do." Then Blondin said, "Well then, get in, son." (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.586)

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The young boy of course didn't get in, nor did anyone else. The reason he wouldn't get in; he didn't really think Blondin could do it. Words are cheap when it comes to trust. If you really believe something, you will commit to it. If Jesus asks you to get into the wheelbarrow, you immediately jump right in because you trust him. You trust him, not just what he can do for you like providing fish and bread.

You trust him even when the way gets tough, and others abandon him. Trust is easy when it doesn't demand anything from us. But true faith in Christ demands we get into the wheelbarrow, or get out of the boat, or pick up our cross and follow him. Trust means that we follow him, even when others believe it is foolish to do so.

Are you tired of chasing things that do not satisfy, that leave you hungry and wanting more? Then why not choose instead to partake of the bread Jesus offers you?