

“It’s Not About Me or You”

I understand that Rev. McDonnell and Rev. Marsh (*a.k.a. Jim and Donna*) had you out of church early the last two Sundays. Well, that’s not going to happen today! So let me get right to the point of today’s lesson. You and I need to be reminded that the church does not exist for the care and feeding of the clergy (me!). Nor does the church exist for the stroking, flattering, and care of the laity (you!). The practice of faith, the worship, the fellowship, the serving, the giving ... all of this is not about me nor is it about you.

The church is the body of Christ that exists for the praise of, the glorification of, and the service of God. The church’s glory is theological not sociological. The church’s glory is biblical not anthropological. We gather on Sundays to interpret all of life in the light of the Incarnation (God became flesh in Jesus). We gather to view and review all things in the light of Jesus Christ, who is for us the “bread from heaven.”

A poor man who begged for food all his life hears that the king was coming to town. He decided to go out early, get a good place by the side of the road, met him when he arrived, and ask the king for a gift. He found a perfect place for the confrontation, and began to wait. In his pouch the poor man had some fruit, a sandwich, a piece of meat, and a few coins. The day wore on, but no king. Finally the king came down the road. The poor man got to his feet, shoved and got to a place close by where the king would come. He called out to the king, imploring him, “Good sir, I am one of your poor servants, take mercy upon me and give me a coin.”

However, the king looked down at him and said, “You give me a gift!” The poor man reached into his pouch and searched. First he pushed aside the sandwich and the fruit. Then he pushed aside the coins. Finally he found three small crumbs at the bottom of the pouch. These he gave to the king. The king went on his way, and the beggar went to his hovel and cried because of his great disappointment. That night, when he dumped out the contents of his pouch, he discovered that where the three crumbs had been there were now three gold pieces, shaped exactly to the size of the former crumbs. “Why! Why!” he moaned, “did I not give the king my all, my best?”

Today’s lesson from John 6 is a parallel text to the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. In that story, Jesus talks about two kinds of water: the water in the well and the living water he provides. People who drink from the well will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water Jesus provides “*will never be thirsty*” (Jn 4:14). Now, in today’s gospel passage, the question is not drink, but food ... not water, but bread ... not thirst, but hunger. Once more Jesus provides a contrast between the temporal and the permanent ... this time between the “food that perishes” and the “food that endures.”

Also today’s text is similar to the John 4 passage in the sense that, just as the woman at the well only gradually understood what Jesus was talking about, so the crowds in this passage are slow to come to understanding. They have been with Jesus at the great feeding on the mountainside, and they have been impressed that Jesus “is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” But they follow not for the bread of eternal life, but to satisfy other hungers ... physical and otherwise. However, over time, Jesus gradually moves the crowd to the place where they can hear the deepest truth, namely that Jesus himself, is the true bread ... Jesus himself is the food that gives eternal life. People cannot work for it. They can only believe and receive. They can only give this king their best ... their all.

But it does take time for them to understand this deep truth, as it also takes us time to acknowledge the difference between the temporal and the permanent; bread that satisfies our hunger and bread that satisfies our spirit. A closer look at our lesson raises a more difficult question, one that tells of the difference between the hunger for a blessing and the lust for a jackpot. We may at first be impressed by the crowds’ spiritual earnestness. They were fed by Jesus on the mountainside and eagerly followed him all the way to Capernaum. We assume that they want to be near Jesus! We assume they thirst for his teachings; that they long to deepen their encounter with God. We assume the crowd is hungry for a blessing. Our assumptions are wrong! Jesus discerns their true motives: “You are not looking for me because of the signs of God’s presence! You are looking for me because you got well fed on the

mountain.” In other words, Jesus is telling them that they are looking for him for all the wrong reasons! They weren’t after a blessing. Like lotto players, they seek a jackpot!

Now, I must be careful here; it’s not that simple. This is not the crass account of people who got their bellies filled and who cared nothing for the life of faith. This crowd believes it is following Jesus with good intentions and true religious reasons. After all, when they were fed on the mountain, they said of Jesus with one voice, “*This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.*” (John 6:14). So why does Jesus challenge their motives? I believe that Jesus perceived that the crowd was following him because he could make their lives better ... better on their terms and their agenda. Jesus wants to give them life ... they want to improve their lifestyle. Jesus wants to give them a blessing ... they want a jackpot!

We do the same thing when we assume that God’s role is to make the life we have designed and planned come to fruition. “O God, I have these plans. Make them work.” That’s not asking for a blessing. That’s asking for a jackpot. Jesus is not a short order cook preparing food to suit our urges. Jesus offers not the “*food that perishes,*” but the “*food that’s endures for eternal life*” (John 6:27). The food that endures for eternal life is, of course, Jesus himself. He tells the crowd, as he tells us: “*I am the bread of life!*” (John 6:35). This is not perishable bread that feeds a passing impulse, but the nourishment of God that feeds our souls. This is not bread that we are supposed to knead and bake, as if we could. This is bread that God gives us as a gift. When the crowd, continued to be confused, they asked Jesus: *What must we do to perform the works of God?* (John 6:28). In essence Jesus replies, “You cannot ‘perform’ the work of God. God’s work will transform you, but you cannot perform it. God performs the work of God. You are to believe it ... receive it ... be fed by it ... and most importantly ...live it.”

I remember reading about a rabbi who died in England. His obituary told of his life, how when he was a young boy, he and his family were prisoners in a Nazi death camp. In the camp, the prisoners were given just barely enough food to survive --- some grain, a bit of stale bread, and a few grams of lard each week. Despite this harsh environment, this boy’s family continued to observe the Sabbath. Somehow managing to scrounge up a piece of candle and a little food each week, they said the Sabbath prayers, and pronounced the Sabbath blessings.

One week, however, there was no candle. So, when the evening came and the Sabbath was at hand, the boy’s father took some of their precious lard and molded it around a bit of string. Lighting this makeshift candle, he began to lead his family in the prayers and blessings. His son was enraged. When the prayers were done, he confronted his father. “How could you do that? How could you waste what little lard we have to make a candle? It is the only food we have!” His father answered, “Son, without food, we can live for several days. Without hope, we cannot live an hour.”

“*Do not work for the food that perishes,*” Jesus said, “*but for the food that endures for eternal life.*” When it comes to food, the problem seems to be not that there is a scarcity of food from which to choose. Rather the problem seems to be that there is too much food to choose from. With so many food products on the shelves at the store, many people find it difficult to distinguish between those foods that will aid their well-being and those foods that will do nothing but diminish their health. Perhaps the greatest curse that faces modern society is the fact that far too many of our needs and wants have already been satisfied. We have so much that we think it impossible that there could be anything significant still lacking in our lives.

And yet, there are those times we feel so empty. Though we have so much, we still hunger for so much more. Though we are full, even stuffed we are some how not satisfied nor content. That is because this life, this faith is not about you, nor about me. This life, this faith is about God ... God whose Son Jesus sets a table before us and offers himself. Will we accept his gift, or will we attempt to satisfy our hunger in some other way? Allow yourself to be fed by God. Allow yourself to be nourished by His Word. Eat the bread of life! Drink from the cup of salvation. Then you will be truly blessed ... your soul nourished. Then at the end of each day, when you examine the contents of your own life, you won’t feel compelled to regret like the beggar: “*Why did I not give the king my all, my best.*”

Bread of life! Bread of heaven! Feast upon it! Be fed by God!