

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – Bread of Life – August 1, 2021**  
**Ephesians 4:1-16 and John 6:24-35**

Last week, we learned about a small boy who presented Jesus with five barley loaves and two fish as an offering. This gift, while commendable, hardly seemed sufficient to satisfy the physical hunger of some 5,000 people. And yet, by the grace of God, it became more than enough. Assuming the role of a host at a Jewish meal, Jesus blessed the food, and gave it to his “guests” – all 5,000 of them. And, then, when they had their fill, twelve baskets of leftovers were collected.

The point here is not that Jesus is a magician, pulling rabbits out of hats with sleight of hand and optical illusions. The point isn’t even that God works miracles, though God both can and often does. The point is that we are to look beyond our fixation with the miraculous which, if it becomes the sum of our faith, is really just an endless longing for the next sign that Jesus really is who he says he is.

My suggestion for each of you is the same approach that I take in my own life of faith. That is, that we focus more on the feeding than we do on the miraculous. For, in this narrative, we learn that God provides more than we need. More than we can imagine. Even more than we had hoped for.

In recent years, the concept of the prosperity gospel, or this idea that God blesses those who are faithful with material things in the here and now, has gained in notoriety and in popularity. Yet, the totality of the scriptures teach us that God's provision is rarely realized in purely economic terms. Thus, just as we should not equate poverty with God's judgment, it is equally misguided to assume that wealth is a sign of God's favor. And in the end, following the logic of the prosperity gospel will get us no closer to understanding the God who has been made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Friends, approximately six miles south of Jerusalem lies the city of Bethlehem. This is the place that is identified in both the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke as the location of Jesus' birth. Literally, the name Bethlehem means "house of bread" or "city of bread." And the symbolism here is undeniable. "God, who provided bread in the wilderness and sent his Son as the salvific bread from heaven, ordained that Christ would be born in the city of bread."<sup>1</sup>

Today, with the feeding of the 5,000 still fresh in our memories, we learn that Jesus is man on the move. And as he pushes ahead, the crowd is clamoring to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Leland Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible*, (IVP Academic, 1998), 118.

John Buchanan observes that this crowd is “relentless, determined, driven. They are not about to be distracted or discouraged. Their hunger is deep, palpable.”<sup>2</sup> And having eaten their fill of bread, they now want more.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, this massive following misunderstands the significance of what Jesus has done. Recognizing this, Jesus “exhorts them to focus not on material loaves, which perish, but on spiritual food, which lasts forever.”<sup>4</sup> Or, stated differently, “their worldview is too earthly, temporal, and mundane.”<sup>5</sup> Yes. “Until the crowds start seeing the world with spiritual eyes, they will always misunderstand who Jesus is and what he does.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the world, bread is a staple of the human diet. It has been this way for thousands of years. Today, any of us could travel a short distance, enter a grocery store, and find an entire aisle dedicated to dozens of varieties of bread. Convenient, portable, and nutritious, bread is always at the ready.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as any dietician will tell you, not all bread is created equally.

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Buchanan, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 211.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Max J. Lee, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 209.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, 210.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, 210.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/295235#\\_noHeaderPrefixedContent](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/295235#_noHeaderPrefixedContent)

When I first got married, my wife noticed that my eating habits could use some improvement. I was far too heavy on the carbs and the sugar, on the dairy and the meat. She wasn't rude or mean about it. Rather, she was kind and direct. And even though I resisted, I knew that she just wanted what was best for me. In time, my preferences have shifted. Now, while I do not pretend to be the poster child for healthy living. I have certainly changed. I now prefer things like whole wheat, which keeps me satisfied longer and provides the kind of nutrition that my body craves.

In all aspects of life, our choices matter. And I have learned that a diet which indulges in highly processed ingredients and additives will do little to improve my quality or span of life. Rightly, we are each longing for something better. And this is true not just at our tables. To be human is to be hungry, and “to long for more than daily life provides. To be human is to yearn for meaning, ultimacy, salvation.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, it is this hungry yearning, writes Buchanan, which “inspires poets, artists, musicians to dig deep and reach high and to write and paint and compose. That hunger drives scientists to experiment and explore the unknown. That longing

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<sup>8</sup> Buchanan, 212.

for something more is the source of human restless creativity and accomplishment. It is one of the things that defines us as human. It is created in us by God.”<sup>9</sup>

All across the world, people are seeking to commune with the divine. Gerard Sloyan writes, “the modern Jew has *torah* to live by, the Muslim the revelation of God through the Prophet. Christians say they live by faith in God through Jesus Christ. The question they need to ask themselves,” then, is “Do they want this bread ‘always?’”<sup>10</sup>

In her book, *Take This Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-First-Century Christian*, Sara Miles writes, ““One early, cloudy morning, when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine... I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled at its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion.””<sup>11</sup>

For Sara Miles, “Bread opened the door to faith and a call to discipleship. She organized a feeding program in her new church that has grown and now feeds hundreds of the hungry and needy poor weekly. She recalls how she had read the

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<sup>9</sup> Buchanan, 212.

<sup>10</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *John, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Buchanan, 212.

story about Jesus seeing the hungry crowd and telling his surprised disciples to give them something to eat.”<sup>12</sup>

The author’s work is meaningful and inspired, to be sure – a testament to the self-giving nature of life in Christ. And yet, whatever the quality of the bread on our tables, we will not remain satisfied forever. That insatiable hunger will return. And we will soon go searching for bread enough to sustain us in that moment.

Today, Jesus proclaims, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” With this timeless invitation, he freely offers the gifts of life and grace to all who long for spiritual food that shall never perish. And when all have had their fill, we see that there is more than enough. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Buchanan, 212.