

August 3, 2003
Season after Pentecost
David L. Edwards

Food for the Soul

John 6:24-35 *'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.'*

We go too far in fearing for our unhappy bodies, while our forgotten spirit shrivels up in some corner. --Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*

Christ, from first to last, teaches the reality of eternal life. His only lesson was life. It is the desire of the soul to live, and that life is the real life.

--Hazrat Inayat Khan (Sufi master), *The Awakening of the Human Spirit*

A miracle has just happened! Jesus has fed five thousand people from five loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish shared by a generous little boy (6:9-10). The crowd is amazed. Surely Jesus is the great Prophet of God! But then an odd thing happens. John writes, "With that Jesus realized that they would come and carry him off to make him king, so he fled back to the mountain alone." What is this? Jesus has been scared off by what we would consider success. He had the multitude eating out of his hand, literally and figuratively! But just when Jesus gains some power and influence, he runs away.

We so easily misunderstand Jesus and his message. This comes clearer in our reading for this morning. The crowd pursues Jesus. They have a hunger for more miracles. When they find Jesus, he tells them some truth about themselves. They are not looking for him because they want true signs of God's power. They only want more food, more material bounty, more physical security. For Jesus, there is a difference between a "sign" and a miracle. A sign is a demonstration of God's power that seeks to call people to faithfulness, to deeper living. A miracle is a display of divine power that people seek for its own sake, or rather, for their own sakes. Jesus isn't above providing signs, but he's not interested in stirring up religious fervor that doesn't lead to faith, to discipleship, to a deep and real relationship with God. That's why he ran away. The people wanted to enthrone him so that the miracles might keep on coming.

"Do not work for the food that perishes," says Jesus, "but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." The word "work" here means striving toward something, not earning something. It means deciding what is most important, and then setting our lives in that direction. We are to strive for the deeper, most real level of life, not the superficial level of the material. Our striving takes place mostly on the material level—working endless hours to secure our lives in affluence and comfort; ordering our lives around material and physical security, as persons and as a society. To make its profits, the commercial world preys upon our fear of being without something. The political world plays on our fears, promoting wars to "protect our interests." Popular religion plays along with a false "gospel of prosperity" and abandoning the role of prophet for that of chaplain to political and national interests. The teachings and life of Jesus call us away from all of that to the deepest level of life, that of the spirit, of our relationship with God. Jesus teaches the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount, calling us to seek first God's kingdom, and to trust that all we need will be provided. So many times Jesus teaches the same lesson. So many times we wander from it. He offers us one kind of bread. We keep seeking another kind.

“Strive instead for the food that lasts for eternal life.” The food that feeds the soul, the center and core of our being. Ron Elliott put it very well to me in a discussion last week. He said that it is as though we have this hole in our center, which cannot be filled by anything but God. We try to fill it with everything else—food, alcohol, drugs and other addictions—but nothing fills the hole because it is meant for God alone. Until we come to that eternal food, until we come home to our true selves, to God, we keep trying to fill that center with all the wrong things. That’s what Jesus was getting at. Our lives have the wrong proportion about them. We spend most of our time, energy, and resources on the food that spoils, that doesn’t last. So fearful are we of hunger, thirst, and death that we lose ourselves in a fog of materialism and preoccupation with the superficial level of life. We spend so little time, energy, and effort cultivating and nurturing the most important and lasting area of our lives—the spiritual, our relationship with God. Jesus calls us to reverse those proportions. The full life is that which is spent on the spiritual journey, the journey of meaning, the journey of knowing ourselves as children of the living God, the journey of following Christ into full personhood and true community. If we are doing that, we will find that center of which Ron spoke becoming fuller and fuller. We can’t do it all at once. We are so immersed in a culture of materialism and a dominant religion that is entangled in that culture that we need to take little steps in the direction of the “true bread from heaven” and away from what doesn’t feed us at the core of our being.

The crowd asks Jesus: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” What they are really asking is, how do we need to live in order to fulfill God’s desire for us? Jesus has heard this question before, asked in different ways. What must we do to be saved? How can we gain eternal life? Jesus’ answer is this: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” To live the full life, to be on the path of spiritual deepening, is to believe in Christ. This means more than having an intellectual commitment to Christ. It doesn’t mean holding onto a doctrine about Christ or becoming a defender of Christianity as a religion. Belief means living the life of discipleship, making that fundamental, inner commitment to be with Christ each day, listening to him in our hearts, and seeking what he is calling us to be and to do. It means giving our lives a new center—the living Christ. When we are striving in that direction, we are rooting and grounding ourselves in God and putting ourselves in tune with the very meaning and purpose of life.

The crowds now want a sign, some proof, some demonstration of all of this so that they can believe, so that they can do the works of God. They want a sign, something like when Moses provided manna for the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings. Jesus reminds them that it was not Moses who provided bread from heaven, but God. The bread God provides is what truly gives life to the world. The people then respond with earnestness: “Sir, give us this bread always.” We’re not even sure the people knew what they were asking for, whether for bread like the loaves and fish miracle, or the true bread that feeds the soul, the center of our being. But they ask nonetheless.

Jesus now says: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus himself is the sign. It is in him that we find all we need for life lived at the deepest level, the level of meaning, of purpose, of fulfillment. He is the perpetual manna for our journey through this life, for as we live close to Jesus, his teachings, his life, his living and present spirit, we find the nourishment for our souls, for that central part of us that hungers and thirsts for the meaning of life. When we are living toward this bread, we are moving closer and closer to the true center of life. The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown puts it this way: “Under all these metaphors of bread, water, and life, Jesus is symbolically referring to the same reality, a reality which, when once possessed, makes [us] see natural hunger, thirst, and death as insignificant.” (The Gospel According to John. P. 275)

How can we feed on this eternal bread? What does Jesus' call to come to him so that we will never be hungry or thirsty mean in terms of how we live our lives day in and day out?

We feed on Christ, the eternal bread in daily prayer. If we are not spending time each day in prayer, study, reflection, and meditation on Christ's spirit and words, we are still walking around hungry and thirsty. And when we are spiritually empty, we cannot hope to express anything of God's love toward others. Our undealt-with anger, loneliness, preoccupation, and inner hurts get projected onto others. We do not feel any peace within ourselves and thus remain unpeaceful toward others.

Last Wednesday evening we met with Salima Christie, who shared with us many things about her journey to Islam, in particular the mystical segment of Islam, Sufism. She spoke about prayer and how she prays, in Islamic tradition, five times each day. In prayer she is reminded of her humble place in the universe. This time in prayer enables her to keep perspective on life and her interactions with other people, allowing her to make the best possible responses to others.

I was deeply impressed by this. How can we who proclaimed faith in Christ hope to manifest anything of his spirit and life in ourselves if we do not devote even a few minutes for prayer each day? Is it any wonder we lose focus and direction? What we in the Church of the Covenant call the inward journey is precisely what Jesus was getting at when he talked about striving for eternal bread, for the food that lasts. If we are not committing ourselves seriously to that journey toward God in Christ, then we are adding nothing to the world and only contribute to confusion and emptiness. But if we are working daily at prayer, at our own spiritual lives, then we are feeding on the bread that lasts, on Christ himself. We are finding our way home to God and nourishing in ourselves peace, compassion, and love.

Jesus also offers himself as eternal bread in community. The church itself is the body of Christ, the bread of life. Christ called together people to live in his love with one another. When we are striving in community to move beyond and through superficial differences and into the love called *agape*, we are nourishing ourselves with eternal food. When we are striving to overcome pride and insecurity that breed distance from one another, then we are finding eternal bread. When we are committing ourselves to one another in forgiveness and deeper understanding, then we are moving into that deeper level of true life, where we experience God's own steadfast love. When we are becoming more and more able to cease our attempts to control others and know them as brothers and sisters who share with us the freedom of being God's children, then we are finding true joy and freedom.

Finally, we share Christ, the bread of life, in worship and the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist. One of the most challenging adjustments for me to make in coming to be with you is that we do not share the Lord's Supper each week. The Disciples of Christ church decided in its beginnings that the sacred meal of Christ's presence with his followers needed to be shared each time they meet for worship. So, I find myself getting a bit undernourished between monthly celebrations of the Eucharist! But when we do share the Lord's Supper, is it with the kind of preparedness Paul spoke of when he called the Corinthian church to examine themselves before they came to the Lord's Table? Is it with the awareness that when we share the bread and cup we are sharing with one another the very life of Christ? At no other moment in our life together as Christ's community do Jesus' words sound clearer: "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The Lord's Supper provides real food and drink for spirits hungry and thirsty for life and meaning. For in these elements of communion and our sharing them with one another, Christ is truly and really present with us, among us, and in us.

O God, help us to know our deepest hunger and to come always to you that we might be fed.
Amen.