



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Free Food and True Bread

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 1, 2021

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost;

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Let us pray.

God of abundant life, who fed your people in the wilderness with the bread of angels, and who feeds us still with the bread of life, transform our hearts to trust always in your grace, and lead us into deeper relationship with you, that we may seek not the food that perishes but the food that endures for eternal life, through Jesus Christ, the true bread. Amen.

As many of you know, I have spent my career in the art world. Back in the day, before COVID, when there used to be a lot of gallery openings, there was a small but dedicated group of gallery-goers who used to show up at every opening. They would check the listings religiously, figure out an itinerary for getting around the city, and then travel around from opening to opening. The only thing is, these people weren't making all this effort for the art or the socializing. They were doing it for the free food. It was an elegant system, really, for getting a free meal, and this group had it down to a science, arriving at each gallery at the precise moment when the hors d'oeuvres were abundant, the cheese platters were piled high, and the drinks were flowing. The thing is, they were so focused on getting to the food, that they never really saw the art that was right in front of them.

There's nothing like free food to get people's attention. Have you ever seen more engaged and interested customers than the people around the free sample table at the supermarket? And as for me, put out a box of donut holes at coffee hour and I'm there!

A similar laser-like focus on free food has drawn people to Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning. A crowd of people, who have just been miraculously fed with a few loaves of bread and a handful of fish, have piled into boats and tracked Jesus down on the other side of the sea. In fact, they have been so impressed by that miraculous feeding that they want to make him a king!

Free food is a powerful thing—so powerful in fact that it was a tactic used by the Roman Empire to pacify their subjects or to gain political support. Jesus knew this, of course. Living among an oppressed people in an occupied territory, he understood that the free food—the “bread and circuses”—that the Roman Empire doled out was merely a distraction from the horrific injustice and exploitation that was really going on. I have to wonder if that distraction is what Jesus had in mind as he began to speak to the crowd. In what has come to be known as the Bread of Life discourse, which we will hear more of over the next few weeks, Jesus wants to make the meaning of the feeding of the 5000 clear. Drawing his followers step by step into a deeper relationship with him, he wants them to understand the true significance of his presence among them and that the food he offers is not about pacifying them or winning them over so he could become their king. It is about giving them abundant life.

When the people catch up with him on the other shore, Jesus sees that they have missed the point of the miracle and that they have come to him just looking for another free meal. He tells them, “Do not work for

the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” The people ask what they must do to perform the works of God, and Jesus responds that there is only one work required by God, that they “believe in him whom he has sent.” Just believe. That’s it. Now, that word “believe” can also be translated as “trust.” So, the only work that God requires of us is to trust in Jesus for our spiritual well-being. To do the work of God, to be aligned with God’s will, is to receive the food that God gives. It’s not a single act, but a life lived in faith.

The people begin to have an inkling of what Jesus is talking about when they connect their experience with him to the story of God’s provision for Israel in the wilderness, the gift of manna. They are beginning to understand that this “bread” Jesus is talking about, whatever it is, is special, and that he is offering them something they need beyond a free meal. Jesus reminds them that God was the source of that ancient bread from heaven, and God is the source of the bread of life right now.

The story of manna in the wilderness would have been very familiar to Jesus’ followers. It is one of the foundational narratives in their shared history as people of God when, during their Exodus from Egypt, God provided food for their ancestors. God did this to test them. But what kind of test is it to receive a daily provision of heaven-sent food?

The test was that God only provided each family enough food for one day. No more, no less. If the people gathered less than their allotted share, they would miraculously receive more. If they gathered more than their allotted share, because they were stubborn or greedy or anxious about where their next meal was coming from, the surplus would become rotten and infested with worms. This was not a test of their character through adversity. It was a test of their character in times of abundance. The people who had been slaves in Egypt were now free. They had all their essential needs met. But they were acting like unruly teenagers, unwilling to follow the rules even though they’d been told a million times how they should behave for the greater good of the whole community. For the Israelites, the experience in the wilderness meant learning how to live in freedom, learning how to live responsibly and with care for each other. The gift of manna was less about having enough to eat than about learning to trust God.

Having lived through this past year and half of pandemic, we know a little something about a wilderness experience, and we know a little something about anxiety—only instead of hoarding manna we’ve been stockpiling hand sanitizer and toilet paper.

For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our work, too. Some are reevaluating their career plans; others are facing disruptive changes in work environments; and others have lost their jobs altogether. That’s one of the reasons we are starting a new group here at St. Bart’s called Forward Together. It’s a support group for people who are experiencing job insecurity, who are unemployed or under-employed, or who are considering a career change. Forward Together is grounded in scripture and prayer and is a safe and confidential space to share experiences, get support, and express concerns about job insecurity. The group focuses on the spiritual aspects of our work and supports members in discerning next steps in their lives.

Day by day, step by step, our wilderness experiences help us to learn to trust God, to rely on God, to have faith in God’s gracious provision. It’s a transformation that happens gradually over time, and like gathering manna in the wilderness, our daily practice of trust gives us a much deeper God-consciousness than any supernatural miracle that God could perform.

That’s how Jesus leads his followers through this teaching, step-by-step, so they will understand that his feeding of the 5000 isn’t about free food. It’s about abundant life in Christ.

If you want to get a sense of what this life in Christ looks like, it's pretty clearly laid out in the Letter to the Ephesians. It is "a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called," a life marked by humility, gentleness, and patience, growing into a mature faith, recognizing our responsibility to God and to each other, bearing with one another in love, and living into our unique God-given gifts in all their diversity, each one of us an essential and integral part of the body.

As we allow God to work through us, day by day we are transformed. We are no longer held captive to our individual desires, no longer so focused on the search for free food that we miss the gifts right in front of us or lose sight of the God-given gifts we have within us. As we learn to trust in God's gracious and abundant provision, we are free to be active participants in building up the body of Christ.

Even as we work to provide for our basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, Jesus calls us into deeper relationship with him, and to live into the lives God intended for us. This is the food that feeds our souls, frees us from self-centeredness, and connects us with the work of God.

Amen.

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