

Year B, Pentecost 11, Proper 13

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John 6:24-35

Recruiters Follow Jesus to Capernaum, 2nd Edition

John's gospel story continues from where we left off last week. Last week Jesus was on the other side of "the Sea of Tiberius," that Roman lake otherwise known as "the Sea of Galilee". A large crowd had gathered and Jesus had fed them using five barley loaves and two fish provided by a boy. It was a wonderful picnic in a park-like setting and when they finished they gathered twelve baskets of bread. We took all of this as a sign pointing to God's super-abundance even though the disciples had not thought there was enough.

In a move we did not expect, the crowd, whose hunger has now been satisfied, begins plotting to make Jesus their king. Jesus realizes what they are up to and withdraws from everyone including the disciples.

In the dark of night the disciples, not knowing where Jesus is or why he left them, board their boats without Jesus and head home to Capernaum. After rowing three or four miles a storm blows in and they are in trouble. They see Jesus coming toward them walking on the water and they are terrified. I think they think Jesus is mad at them for leaving him. They will think this again after his crucifixion when they again abandoned him. When Jesus gets to them he says, "Don't be afraid, it is I."

Today's story picks up on the following day when the crowd of the previous day discover Jesus and his disciples all missing. They figure Jesus and the disciples must have gone across the lake to Capernaum and so they get into their boats and cross the lake looking for him. "When they find him on the other side of the sea, they say to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'" Jesus doesn't explain what has happened the previous night. From their perspective Jesus is playing hard to get. Like all coquettish behavior it only increases their desire for him, though that is not Jesus' reason for avoiding them.

They respectfully refer to him as Rabbi. They are still hoping to recruit him into their war against Rome—ready for him to lead and teach them in their "holy" campaign. I say "holy" because they believe God is on their side. They can't imagine Jesus' withdrawal signaled his utter disinterest in their human-generated plan.

On first reading Jesus' next response sounds rude and does not seem to respond to their question. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." I think he is saying, "It appears what I did yesterday didn't point to anything of significance for you. You didn't see the meaning. You missed the point about

God's abundance. You just experienced it as a quick and easy way to have your appetites satiated so that you could go on with your plans. You didn't see how the bread I offer takes away the hatred and desire for revenge in your hearts. Your hearts were not changed."

Jesus knows where these dark motives lead and he has come into the world to point in a new direction. Instead of trusting in God's abundance and provision, they are taking matters into their own hands and trying to wrench what they think they need out of Rome. Could we say the crowd's bread was vengeance and retribution, and not the bread of heaven? If these people were to gain the power they seek, would they be any different than the Romans? And if so, for how long? The Sandinistas were once the people's liberators; they started schools, medical clinics, and reformed the laws ruling land ownership in favor of the Nicaraguan people; now they are their oppressors or so it seems from the evening news.

Jesus continues, "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." We will sustain our selves with the food that perishes or we will feast on bread that has no expiration date. I don't think he is talking about literal bread verses spiritual bread. I think he is contrasting the bread of violence, revenge and hatred that we can choose to eat with the bread of love and forgiveness that multiplies as it is eaten. We will eat bread but we have a choice of which kind.

Think about it, how many people do you know daily consume the bread of hatred, polarization, xenophobia, and racial animosity? It's popular bread served anew each day and the restless and finger-pointing crowd eats it ravenously. It has few nutrients for life and often profoundly harms the soul and maybe even the body. In the end what do we have after eating it—"food that perishes" leaving us still hungry and as empty as before. Why does this food perish? Because it does not nurture relationship, being for the other, sacrificing for the other, and taking good care of our own God-loved souls.

Right now this crowd thinks their campaign against Rome will sustain them. They think being over-against the hated other will nurture their souls and give them reason to live. Listen up! This is food that perishes. It has no lasting value! Don't work for it!

But there is "food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." This food nurtures and does not depend on being over against anyone. It has no enemies and no one is alien. Jesus is the food upon which God the Father has set his seal.

Our recruitment committee catches the drift of something that sounds good and decides to make further inquiry. "What must we do to perform the works of God?" they ask.

Jesus responds. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." It's not an action at all; it's a belief in Jesus. It's not doing, its trusting. He tells them the work of God is to

believe him. How can believing be work? It's work because it requires us to swim against the cultural current and our own fear. The culture does not believe in Jesus or the peace toward which Jesus points. The culture believes all problems are solved through force, muscle, winning in the context of rivalry and the imposition of our will over the other. The culture will always try to un-convert those who know ourselves to be Jesus followers. Consequently, the work of God is believing in him whom God has sent to show us his face.

We can see their anger stirring as they ask, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" In essence they reply "Well, if we can't do anything, what are you doing to convince us to believe in you?" Somebody has to be doing something! When they came looking for Jesus they were moving toward him. Now they are moving away.

They demand he give them a sign and provide an example. "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Do you see the irony? Just the day before Jesus had asked five thousand people to sit down on a grassy spot and had fed them with five loaves and two fish. He had given them a sign but they didn't recognize it.

He responds, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." Yes, Moses gave you manna and it was from God but it still wasn't the true bread that nurtures the soul to such depth that even you're rivalrous and vengeful desires gradually dissolve. No, you will need more than manna for that. And then he adds, "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Manna gave life to a few thousand misfits and outcasts in the desert a long time ago but Jesus has come to give life to the world—the whole world, everyone, the human species.

Even this committee of recruiters for war cannot resist the graciousness of Jesus' call to wholeness and peace. "Sir, give us this bread always." Once again they are coming toward Jesus and their ears can now hear as he tells them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Today we receive the bread of life. It responds to a hunger deeper than any bread made with wheat and hands. May we take it in and allow it to change us. **Amen.**