

Sermon for August 1, 2021

Shivon Miller

We are about to enter a four week string of scripture readings titled the “Bread Of Life Discourse” or B.O.L.D. texts, as theologian Karoline Lewis refers to them. The next four Sundays of texts revolve around Jesus as the bread of life. This BOLD section of scripture begins in John chapter 6, prior to our Gospel reading today. We read that the crowds have gathered around Jesus “after seeing the signs he was doing for the sick.” Much of the gospel of John refers to Jesus “doing signs” and the people “seeing signs.” Jesus, seeing these “sign followers” gathered around him, asks his disciple Philip “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Interestingly the people have not come seeking bread – they have come only because they have seen the signs Jesus was doing for the sick. The people have NOT said that they are hungry. They have NOT asked Jesus to feed them. This is a proactive move on Jesus’ part, knowing and responding to a need that has not yet been stated. He offers them something they have not even identified that they desire.

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus asks Philip. And our scripture text reads “Jesus said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.” What is the test? Philip gives a logical response “Six months wages would not buy enough bread.” Not the answer Jesus was looking for.

Jesus goes on “Make the people sit down” and the scripture text stresses two things: there was a great deal of grass in that place and a large number of people. Why mention the grass and the number of people? There was an abundance of grass - enough for all in the masses to be seated. There was “a great deal of grass,” a surprising amount able to provide seating at the table for all. And there on that abundance of grass, with that abundance of sign-seeking people, Jesus takes the scarcity of five loaves and two fishes and feeds in abundance all of the people there. The text states he distributed “as much as they wanted” . He doesn’t just feed them the minimal amount needed to tide them over, he gives in abundance and even at the end the remaining fragments fill over 12 baskets.

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus said this “to test him.” Philip gives the logical response considering the earthly bread that they would need to buy to fill human hunger. Is the test to consider whether this is really the bread that will be able to fill the people’s true hunger? Is the bread that feeds really to be bought? “Where are we to buy bread?” How would you have responded?

This section of text ends by saying “the people saw the sign that he had done.” Did they really?

In today’s scripture this crowd has followed Jesus and Jesus says “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

They have most certain seen the bread multiply and have eaten as much earthly bread as they wanted. But do they see the sign pointing to who Jesus is? Did they miss that Jesus himself is

the sign of the abundant God who comes anticipating all hunger, who comes to feed out of his own being before they have even identified their need?

Jesus says “Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

Jesus stands before them, God in the flesh, and they still ask “What sign are you going to give us?” They want manna from heaven, bread from God, like their ancestors received in the wilderness. And Jesus says “the bread of God is that which comes from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread - whoever comes to me will never be hungry.”

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test his disciple for he himself knew what he was going to do. “I am the bread of life.” Jesus sees our need before we can even identify that we are hungry. God provides with abundance lived out in the flesh in the sign that is Jesus, the bread that cannot be purchased but comes only as gift from God, the bread from heaven, the bread of life.

The people reach for and take their fill of the loaves but will they identify and reach for and receive Jesus the bread of life?

“What must we do to perform the works of God?” the people ask. And Jesus answers “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” It cannot be bought, not because of the scarcity of our wages but because all is gift of God in and through the life of Christ

When it became necessary for us to lock down for the pandemic there was a lot of concern around how to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion. How were we to celebrate the Lord’s Supper? How were we to receive this bread from heaven? There were no gatherings of 5,000 people, even on “great deals of grass.” How would we safely share the elements? I laughed when the first box of our disposable communion cups arrived. The bread is the size of a tic tac. How was this representative of the abundance of God? Jesus seemed to be asking “Where are we to buy food to feed these people?” and we, like Philip, got caught up in the logical responses of scarcity and earthly concerns. Jesus said this to test him for he himself already knew what he was going to do. God provides manna, bread from heaven. Jesus says “I am the bread of life” – Take and eat, body of Christ given for you. Reach and receive not the loaf but Christ himself. “Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

Jesus is the food that endures for eternal life. We keep looking for signs, when the God of abundance has already come down from heaven to dwell with us in flesh. We keep trying to perform the works of God when Jesus says “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Today as you take and eat may you know that: this is not a bread you must pay for - it is gift given for you, it is not a bread that runs out – take as much as you want and know that fragments will still abound, it is not a bread that will only tide you over until you hunger again – come and you will never be hungry, it is not a bread that can ever be kept from you – for nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, it is not a bread tic tac sized and made from dough– it is Christ himself given for you. Believe that Jesus is the bread of life, the sign, the one sent by God because God knew and provided for your need even before you were able to identify your hunger.