

## WONDER BREAD

*So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "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. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:24-35, NRSV)*

Twice in my life I have given in to temptation and signed away, if not my soul, my credit card number. Twice I have been blinded by the shiny veneer of Stairmasters, treadmills and Nautilus machines. Twice I have bought into the dream of rock-hard abs, firm biceps and pronounced calf muscles. Twice I have joined a health club.

Both times went pretty much the same way. I started out strong: coming in early every morning for months on end, nodding to the clerk at the desk, running the treadmills, working out and sitting down for a satisfied soak in the sauna. After a while, however, my schedule would get a little busier, I would get a little lazier and the excitement over my health club visitation would fade. Eventually, I quit going all together, only to groan at every credit card statement as the club continued to bill me every month for the life of my contract whether I showed up or not.

Like a lot of things in my life, I got off to a quick start followed by a slow and steady decline. A friend of mine described this behavior as "buying the packaging." You know when you're in the supermarket and you have to choose between the less expensive item in the bland box and the more expensive version of the same item in the flashy box, and you end up going for the more expensive one, just because it looks better? In the case of the health clubs, I bought the packaging. I could have bought a state-of-the-art home gym and treadmill for the same money I gave to the health clubs, but who wants to work out in their basement when you can work out with all the beautiful people in a beautiful place?

In today's scripture passage, we find some people that I can identify with. They're the type that likes the flash rather than the substance, the light rather than the heat and the packaging rather than the product. They're my kind of people.

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, we find a crowd of folks who have witnessed a genuine miracle of Jesus, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15). In that miracle, Jesus demonstrates his power by meeting a real human need: hunger. Unfortunately, the significance of this miracle is completely lost on those who witness it. They decide to take Jesus by force and make him king (6:15). As one of my former professors, Gail O'Day, writes:

The crowd's reaction shows how difficult it is to receive Jesus' gifts on his terms without translating them immediately into one's own categories. Jesus' gift of food, the offer of his grace, provided the crowd with a glimpse of his identity, but they immediately tried to twist that identity to serve their own purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, as seen in our passage today, the crowd never stops thinking about its own interests and desires. They never seem to think about what exactly Jesus is asking of them.

After Jesus' disciples head out in their boats across the Sea of Galilee and Jesus does the whole walking on water thing, the crowd still sitting around by the seaside realizes that Jesus has left them. So, they go into hot pursuit of Jesus. They get into boats and head across to the other side. What follows is an interesting dialogue between Jesus and the crowd. Jesus speaks to them about bread, but his words leave them with more questions. This passage should also cause us to wonder what Jesus means by bread.

Question #1 from the crowd is "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus doesn't answer how he got across the Sea. He responds by saying, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (6:26). The crowd missed Jesus' miracle at sea and didn't even get the miracle that happened before their eyes. They have come looking for another meal. They bought the packaging and gave little concern to the product—the substance of Jesus' words and deeds. Jesus tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life" (6:27). Unlike the bread the crowd ate earlier which will eventually spoil (6:12), Jesus speaks of a different kind of "bread" that endures forever.

Jesus' words about bread prompt the crowd to wonder about how to achieve it. Question #2: "What must we do to perform the works of God?" (6:28). Their question should strike us as a natural one: "Alright, if we have to work to get the good stuff, tell us what we have to do, Jesus." These people are people of action. They sailed across a sea to find Jesus after all.

This attitude may be familiar to us. Our church is located in a community of achievers—some might say over-achievers. Our residents operate at the top of their fields. Our

children go to schools that are in the highest ranks of the nation. (I would say top 10 but *Newsweek* said Manhasset is only eleven and Great Neck South is only eighteen.) Whether it's work, school, sports or even play, we make sure we're at the top. If it can't be put on a college application or a resume (or at least dropped nonchalantly at a cocktail party), why bother? We don't mind doing what it takes to acquire what we want, but following Jesus is ultimately not about what we do or what we want. It is about what God does and what God wants.

Jesus responds to the crowd, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29). The Gospel is about the grace of God not about what we do to get it. The Gospel is so radical because it is not about what *we* do at all. It is about what *God* does. The "work of God" is to believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "Don't do. *Believe.*"

It's a horribly upsetting idea. In a culture geared towards results that measure a person's worth by what she produces and what she possesses, this is hard to stomach. All we have to do is believe? I wonder how we're supposed to do that? Believing is hard, because it is intangible. We supposedly understand our own actions, but trying to understand what God is doing takes more effort. Yet, what seems like the more difficult task—doing it ourselves—is actually the easier choice. Believing requires trust and a loss of control. Both of these actions are difficult because they seem to go against what is normal for people who are used to depending on themselves to get things done.

This raises a further problem for those who wish to follow Jesus, one that seems contrary to a "do it yourself" attitude. The crowd questioning Jesus now seems to move from wanting to do it on their own to wanting Jesus to do everything for them. Their difficulty with simply believing prompts the crowd to ask Jesus question #3: "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (6:30-31). They want a sign!

Both attitudes of the crowd, as expressed in their questions, may seem contradictory (we'll do it on our own vs. do it for us), but they are merely two sides of the same coin. Both are efforts to control the situation and to control God. Both essentially tell Jesus how things should be done rather than listening for what God wants done.

A sign does not seem that unreasonable of a thing to ask for. Yet, once again we are buying the packaging rather than the product. We want the flash and excitement of something new but not the responsibility that such signs demand. This interest in what is exciting and new seems to pervade our culture at the expense of our ability to go deeper into things that really matter.

There's a reason why we're watching the Kobe Bryant case. It's so much easier than all that stuff about war, politics and suffering people. It asks nothing of us, because it is removed from our lives. There's a reason why each week there's a different diet, weight-loss pill or thigh-master/ab-roller/electro-shock belt. It's easier to move on to the next quick fix than to stick with the last one. (Trust me. I know from experience. I've got an

ab-roller in a closet gathering dust.) There's a reason why we look to the next blockbuster and red carpet premiere. There's a reason why we can't wait for the next reality show. It's easy. We are entertained. We all want the "snap, crackle and pop." We like the flashy stuff, because it asks so little of us.

In our culture, I believe we are being entertained to death. From the expensive cars we drive to the game boys our kids play with, we are an over-stimulated people. With all this stuff, is it any wonder that we expect God to spoon-feed us too?

The crowd says, "Remember Jesus? Moses provided our ancestors bread from heaven every day (Exodus 16). We'll do the work of God, but we expect something in return. Entertain us! Provide for us! Blow us away God! We want a divine experience to rival the most outrageous reality TV show. Instead of 'Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?' we'll have 'Who Wants to Follow Miracle-Working Messiah?'"

The problem with such mass-market religion is that it gets old real fast. As the experience of the Israelites in the desert proved, bread from heaven every day eventually became routine. Daily miracles did not stop the Israelites from complaining against God or doubting God's care for them. Similarly, the crowd in our scripture passage today just witnessed Jesus feeding five thousand people from a few loaves of bread, but here they are asking for a sign again. Like a child wanting the newest toy for Christmas, we're ready for what's next not what's already happened.

Once again, Jesus' response to the crowd calls us out of our marketplace mentality. God is not Santa Claus. God is not Hollywood. God is not a marketing executive telling you what to buy, eat, wear and own. God offers you the Bread of Life that never grows stale and never becomes yesterday's fad. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35).

Unlike the latest fashions of our culture, Jesus does not go out of style. Jesus offers us a way to quench our unquenchable thirst. He offers us fulfillment that never leaves us hungry. He calls to us and says that there is something more than temporary satisfaction and that there is an end to acquiring the newest and the brightest in order to throw it away tomorrow.

Later on in this chapter, after more questions and answers with Jesus, the crowds eventually leave Jesus. They were looking for a get-rich scheme and a quick weight-loss program, but Jesus was offering a lifetime investment strategy and a permanent change in diet. Like me at the health club, the packaging was all they were interested in.

When we eat the bread Jesus offers, what will we wonder about? I wonder if we will take a bite and then move on to the next big thing or if we will eat our fill. Jesus offers us a new life, a better life, a life of fulfillment. I wonder what type of bread we will choose.

Rev. Chase Peeples  
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, August 3, 2003  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life, you offer us sustenance and fulfillment. Too often we choose entertainment and distraction. This morning we have gathered seeking something more, so send your Spirit to us and fill us.

When we hear of more deaths—both Iraqi and American—in Iraq, war in Liberia while world leaders debate about getting involved again in Africa, further corruption in government and business, help us to seek you rather than a distraction from the noise of our world. Help us to turn to you in prayer joining our voices to yours calling for justice, mercy and peace.

Make our lives useful to you. Amen

---

<sup>i</sup> Gail O'Day, "John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 597.