

Bread of Life

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

John 6:24-35

August 1, 2021

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Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

John 6:24-35

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.

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As we have seen over the last several days, and are reminded of every few years, Olympic athletes are amazing individuals. They have trained and worked, sometimes under grueling conditions, every day for years in order to get to this one competition. Not only does it

require sheer skill and raw talent to become the best of the best, the elite of the elite, it requires extreme concentration, intense dedication and a strong focus to make it into the Olympics. This year's Olympic Games, still defined as 2020, show us all of that caliber and more as the athletes sustained their focus and abilities and dedication over a pandemic-waiting year and now strive to achieve their dreams without crowds or family present, without the traditional pomp and circumstance, and with the ever present and growing Covid positive cases in the Olympic Village.

Watching the athletes compete against one another, and even at times watching them support a competitor, their focus is on the task, on the moment. It seems as if nothing can distract them. Yet as one commentator and former Olympian said when discussing all that is happening around the Games this year, "you know what is happening yet you carry on."

None of us here will ever stand on a podium and have an Olympic gold medal placed around our necks but we can take an important page from the athletes playbook, and that is about their ability to focus. Although there is much to distract them—the pandemic, the media, the weather, the empty stands and certainly the mental and physical health challenges personally and among teammates, the ability to focus allows "you (to) know what is happening yet you carry on."

Focusing can be hard as there is so much to distract us from what is important—perhaps because it is something else important, but it may also be something brighter, noisier, shinier, more interesting or at least seemingly so. We feel ourselves and our attention pulled in the different directions of the things we hunger and thirst for.

The inability to focus on what matters most is what Jesus wanted the crowd to recognize and redirect. The crowd of thousands had crossed the Sea of Galilee to follow Jesus as they had seen the signs, the healing, the curing, that he was doing for the sick. They wanted to see more, they wanted to benefit from his gifts. Later that day, after they had been fed spiritually, he then miraculously fed them with five loaves of barley bread and two fish. They had been focused on all that Jesus did for them and recognized him as a prophet.

They did not yet quite understand who Jesus was, but they were on track, they were on the path. That is until they lost their focus. By the next day, just hours after all they had seen, heard and experienced with Jesus, they sought him out again, but as Jesus told them, it now was not because of the signs that had first caught their attention, their hearts, their focus, but because they had been fed, fed by something that was perishable.

"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. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Do not be distracted by what is not important, by what will fade away, by what catches your eye but not your soul. Set your attention on what brings eternal life, on who endures for eternal life. Set your focus on what brings eternal life, on who endures for eternal life. Remember, focus on, where your strength and sustenance comes from, both physically and spiritually.

The crowd remembered God's care of their ancestors when they hungered in the wilderness and God had fed them with quail and manna, with enough physical food for the day and enough spiritual food for the journey. It was essential for the newly freed Israelites in the wilderness to trust God daily for manna, for literally their daily bread. Now Jesus is imploring

their descendants to put full confidence in him, in the Bread of Life, to know and trust that he was giving them a great gift, a divine gift—not just for their physical hunger but also for their emotional, mental, and especially their spiritual hunger. Whatever emotional, spiritual, or physical need they may have, he is the One who can satisfy it. He encouraged them to keep their focus on what matters, not what distracts, from their faith, from their beliefs, and to believe in him whom God has sent for this is how they would always be fed, nurtured and sustained by the Bread of Life.

Our faith ancestors had their distractions that pulled away their focus from the way of Jesus, from the Bread of Life, and we have ours as well. Sometimes our distractions are even of Olympic proportions. Our world is certainly filled with distractions as information moves faster, louder, broader and brighter than ever before, and it takes focus just to sort out what is relevant and useful from what is fluff and useless. So much begs for our focus, our time and attention. Perhaps we are distracted by the anticipation of tomorrow, or the regret of yesterday, or we have confused doing our best with seeking perfection, so are pulled farther and farther away from where our heart and soul belong. Perhaps we are distracted by our possessions and their care so that what we had once worked to obtain no longer brings joy or holds meaning.

The distractions feed our hunger and quench our thirst but only temporarily. We are working for the food that perishes, not for the food that endures for eternal life. Jesus connects the manna for our Israelite ancestors and the miracle of the feeding of the multitude to himself—“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Do not be distracted by what is not important, by what will fade away, by what catches your eye but not your soul. Set your attention on what brings eternal life, on who endures for eternal life. Set your focus on what brings eternal life, on who endures for eternal life. Remember, focus on, where your strength and sustenance comes from, both physically and spiritually, as “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” Jesus is the bread of life, so when we turn to him, when we focus on him—on who he is, on what he has done, on what he does do, and on how we follow him-- he will not only satisfy our spiritual needs but also provide all that we need to live each day as there is always a place for each of us at God’s table.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Amen.