

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Lent

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March 1, 2015

Text: John 6:27-35

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing God’s Satisfaction”

When I packed up to head up to Northern Michigan University in Marquette to begin my first year of studies there, everything I needed to live there I managed to get into my 1966 International Scout: clothes, books, coffee pot, linens, personal care items, records and a small stereo. It all fit in the space of that old Scout, much of it fit in a foot locker I placed at the foot of my bed.

When Lynn and I married the next year and we headed back to Marquette together after the summer break, we rented a small U-Haul trailer but had all we needed to get by since we rented a furnished apartment. When we moved again after graduation, again we rented a trailer to haul our possessions back to Saginaw for the summer break.

Then the move to seminary found us renting a still larger trailer and by the time we were done with 4 years of seminary for me and 2 years of undergraduate work for Lynn, the mover brought a truck to haul everything to Caro, Michigan. Each subsequent move meant a bigger truck, the last one was a semi-trailer.

Can you relate? We live in a consumer oriented society and we spend a lifetime accumulating. Advertisers compete for our hungers, holding the carrots of the latest and greatest product before us and inviting us to follow and bite. Technology seems to have accelerated this need to keep up, hook up, and sign up: new cell phones, satellite or cable packages, “bundle and save”. Around this time of year Hank Graff has been known to don a leprechaun suit with offers of sweet deals on a new ride. Some are drawn to fame and fortune. Mohammed Ali was once asked for advice by a young man. The young man wanted to know how he could quit school and start a boxing career since he had bad grades. Ali smiled at the young man and responded in rhyme: “Stay in college and get the knowledge and stay there til you're through. If they can make penicillin out of moldy bread, they can make something out of you.” (John Fiedler, *Getting Unintimidated*, First Church Pulpit, Dallas, Texas, February 1, 1998.) One of the wealthiest people in the U.S. at the time, John D. Rockefeller was once asked “How much money is enough?” “Just a little more,” he responded.

We have hunger as human beings which we sometimes attempt to fill with that which doesn't satisfy. We want just a little more. We want the latest and greatest until it too gets old and tired and we seek the next thing and then the next. It's the grass is always greener on the other side of the hill fantasy over and over again. And it's not long before we've gone from a 1966 Scout filled with possessions to a semi-trailer or more but none of it really is life-giving. It

may be a way to live but it's not life, at least not life as God would have us live. How do we find, then, that which satisfies?

Of the four Gospels, the Gospel According to John, is by far the most distinct in answer to this question. In this Gospel alone Jesus uses the metaphors of bread, vine, shepherd, way, making the claim that he is each of these things. In chapter 6, we read about bread. The entire chapter is a unit and can't really be broken up because each part relates to the whole.

The first story is Jesus feeding the 5,000 which is the only story—along with the resurrection--that's included in all four of the Gospels. He met their physical need by filling their stomachs with food.

Jesus then is described as walking on the water as the disciples are out in their boat on the lake and then the people follow him to the other side of the lake. Jesus tells them they are following him not because of the signs he has performed but because he filled their stomachs, and they are looking for just a little bit more. Right? They aren't satisfied with what they received. They are looking for more.

Jesus told this crowd—and I'm paraphrasing, "You aren't looking for me to watch for a sign that God's spirit lives in me. You came because you ate some of the loaves I fed the crowd and your stomachs are growling again. Don't work for that kind of food. It will only fill your stomachs. Look for something else. Work for food which will fill your souls, that which is eternal."

The distinction here is between something physical and that which is intangible, between that which satisfies physical hunger pains and that which satisfies the hungers at the core of our being, the being we can't touch or see, but is nevertheless our true selves. As an Iowan said upon first viewing the sea, "It's so big!" "Ayuh," replied the Maine resident, "and that's just the top." There's more to us than meets the eye. There is within us a whole world of thought, feelings, consciousness, personality, of spirit, if you will, which is far different than our physical self. And that part of us needs attention and nurture. We have needs that go beyond taking care of our bodies.

Writing on how to become a Christian, Dr. Samuel Shoemaker wrote:

The inner life of many people is simply vacant. They may once have had a faith to give life coherence and meaning. But, . . . Great numbers of people still think that only stupid and illiterate folk "believe" anything, and that clever educated people have been emancipated from the confinements and superstition of faith. . . . So we fill our hands and our time with all kinds of activity to make us forget, while our souls are empty People turn to pleasure, business, radio and television, sex, drink, drugs, anything to while away a leisure hour, and forget the yawning vacuum that gapes in the place where their souls ought to be. The body dies at our death, and the soul alone survives. Yet we stuff the body and starve the soul, living for the moment and forgetting eternity. (How to Become a Christian, pp.16-17)

Now, I'm not suggesting we ignore physical needs nor that we toss aside those things we enjoy. It's just that there is a deeper reality of which we are a part which we can easily ignore.

"We stuff the body and starve the soul." Another way to describe working ". . . for the food which perishes . . . [and not] for the food which endures for eternal life."

Around this matter Jesus and the crowd have a dialogue:

"O.K., Jesus, you speak of the food which endures for eternal life, so what do we do to get it?"

"Believe in me whom God has sent."

"Well, if you want us to believe that you've been sent by God, you'll have to do better than that. Give us a sign. Moses provided bread from the sky for the wandering Hebrews. How about that? Can you top that? Then, we'll believe you. After all seeing is believing."

How many times have you heard that? Or said that yourself? How many times have you heard commercials claiming the greatest sale ever? Then the next week the same company is claiming the lowest prices ever. And the week after that the announcer informs us that you'll never see prices lower than this. Do you believe them? We're skeptical of such claims and toss them aside as mere advertising hyperbole.

If we're skeptical of such claims, imagine this crowd hearing: "Believe in me because God has sent me." People have the same skepticism of the church. The church says, "God is with us. Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself." The world is saying "Prove it! Sounds like another commercial to us." "Prove it, Jesus! Prove it, church!"

Jesus responded to the crowd, "It was not Moses who gave them that bread from heaven, but it is God, my Father, who gives you the true bread. The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Neither Moses nor the church provides the true bread from heaven. Only God can meet the needs of our inner-most selves. And as for proving it, how can one prove God? The church can offer symbols of God's presence as through our understanding and experience of God through Jesus Christ. We offer fellowship with others who share experiences of God through Christ. But experiencing God's Spirit personally is a matter of perceiving life through the eyes of faith. No one can force us to believe. No one can force you or me to trust God. Even Jesus couldn't do that. Yet, there is this hunger we have as human beings. Consider that part of you that is not physical: your feelings, thoughts, dreams, the deepest part of who you are. It is in that place where God meets us. It is the hungers in that place which the "true bread from heaven" satisfies.

I have often told the story of Laurel White because she gave me permission to tell it. She is a former parishioner who at 50 years of age had a severe stroke. In the ER, she was comatose. The Dr. called in the family at her bedside and told them this was so serious that she might die. What the doctor didn't consider in doing this within earshot was that Laurel could still hear him, and when she heard that she might die, she said she began to panic, thinking about leaving her family, thinking about their pain, thinking she was going to miss grandchildren she would never

see, thinking a lot of things. Her heart started racing which isn't a good thing for a person who has had a stroke. But in the midst of her panic, she heard a voice:

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

Immediately, she calmed down, felt assured it would be okay, that she would be okay, and she was. But do you know where she learned that Psalm of David? She learned it in her Lutheran church as a child. And when she needed it most--when she was most in need of being fed by God's Spirit--God came: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In other words, God really is all we need when it comes right down to it. In the end all we really have is God. And when we have that assurance, there is nothing else to want. God is it.

"Give us this bread. We want it. Always," responded the crowd.

The inner part of ourselves yearns to be fed, and it will not be satisfied by anything that can be packed into a moving van.

Are you and I so very different from the crowd? We believe—or maybe want to believe--don't we, that God is active and alive in the world as people who follow Jesus? We believe—or maybe want to believe--that Jesus was resurrected and is alive through the gift of the Holy Spirit, but I wonder when was the last time you received or witnessed an act of kindness and recognized it as a sign of Christ's presence in the world? When was the last time you or I witnessed someone forgiving someone else and thought, "There is Christ active in someone's heart again"? When was the last time you experienced someone sacrificing on behalf of someone else and said, "Jesus is at it again? Thank you, Lord"?

About 3 weeks ago I was stewing about something, angry with someone, and when I came to my devotional time using a prayer guide that orders my private time with God, one of the readings for the day was Psalm 32. Mind you, I'm preoccupied with my angst and then I read these verses:

"I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,

Whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
Else it will not stay near you.”

Now, we need to be careful about how we interpret scripture as the Word of God because some horrific atrocities have been committed by those who thought they heard God tell them something, which is why John Wesley—the founder of Methodism--balanced scripture interpretation with tradition, experience and reason,--which is another sermon or 4 in and of itself--but I laughed to myself when I read these words as I sat with my angst and heard the voice of God through the psalmist. It was bread for my soul that I needed to hear that day.

Maybe what Jesus is telling the crowds—and us—is to simply trust in him, that he is already here, that signs are aplenty. All we need to DO is trust he is here and watch and listen. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Or as another psalmist proclaimed: “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.” (Psalm 34:8).

Prayer: Lord God, forgive us for accepting table scraps when you offer us the bread of life. Amen.