



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 1, 2021

Scripture Passages: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13; John 6:24-35

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever noticed that in the advertising world, there is a kind of gospel of materiality? A successful advertisement not only sells you a product but it sells you lifestyle, it sells you affirmation and well-being. For instance, I love cars. Don't know why – always have. I love the way they look, I love the design of them. And I am very easily taken in by a good car commercial; easily seduced by a bit of bling and zoom zoom. I admit it. I'm a fish – easily reeled in by a pretty hood ornament; by the materiality of the medium. So I miss the important thing sometimes: and that is that a car is essentially a mode of transport – and a luxury at that. It's easy for me to mistake the sign or the symbol of the pretty car for its true purpose. It's a weakness. What can I say?

So I can understand and have sympathy with Jesus' followers in our Gospel this morning. Because they've been similarly side-tracked. They've gotten focused on a false message – the good news of materiality instead of a Gospel of life.

You see, when we join our story, it's the day after Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed 5000 people with food that should have only fed one small boy. After everyone had been fed and fed well – with plenty left over; after they had witnessed the impossible – that so little was made so abundant because of Jesus, they come looking for more.

And no wonder. As well as understanding Jesus' own reaction to them, we also must understand his followers' circumstances. Theirs was a subsistence culture where people worked for the necessities – for food, to have clothing and a place to live. Disposable income was not something that they had access to. And of course, Jesus would have known this and would also have known that to ease the burden of having to provide for themselves and their families – even for a day – was a profoundly generous gift – but by doing so he had also created a tremendously delicate situation.

Like getting caught in a great sermon illustration instead of understanding the point of the sermon, there were those in the crowd who were focused on bread – on the bounty of sustenance that Jesus had provided for them instead of understanding who he was, why he had given that particular gift, and what their lives might look like because of it.

But Jesus ignores the risk of the great sermon illustration and he extends the bread metaphor in his attempt to communicate just how foundational – like eating and breathing – the good news – the gospel was to a people that he knew were spiritually starving.

As is so often the case in the Gospel of John, Jesus turns the physical into the spiritual. The people want bread—like the bread Moses provided in the wilderness but Jesus had another kind of bread in mind. He told the people the truth - that it wasn't Moses who gave the people bread, it was God. Now God would offer them bread, just a different kind of bread—the bread of life – and he concludes with the difficult statement: I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

You see, God is going to the very heart of the matter. You remember that old maxim that if you give a person a fish – you will have fed them for a day but if you teach them how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime? Well, it's something like that – but more profound – here.

To the disappointment of the crowd for whom he had compassion, Jesus is not promising an endless supply of material things. He is offering himself as the spiritual food that will fill our deepest needs. I say that was a difficult statement because it was – and let's be honest, it is – in its totality.

Because are not only to follow Jesus. We are to consume him... as the Bread of Life. He wants to become part of us, to shape us to his purpose, to live in all that we do. And that's a true commitment. A mature commitment. That's not a picking and choosing kind of deal. It's total and it's real.

St. Paul's often talks about this in his epistles – over and over again - when he calls for us to be more than followers. He calls us to grow up in Christ – to be mature in the faith – to seek the good of all, not to seek the good only for our own selves. It's also what issues out of the difficult and messy story of King David – a man forced by Nathan the prophet to reckon with his own blindness and sin and to come to a terrible kind of maturity – one that carried within it the sacrifice of the innocent. But maturity it is when we are called to set aside our own desires and seek the good of all, to seek God's will.

We're called to maturity - to be able to lay hold of what our vocations are in Christian community – to understand that we aren't all called to be the same thing but each of us has a charism – a gift to be shared with each other – and that all our gifts together build the church. That is the aim and goal - to build the body up in love.

We're called to be able to mature enough to speak truth to each other, but here he makes an important condition - one that we all too often and perhaps willingly - forget - to speak that truth in love. That's maturity indeed. And taking Jesus into us, and letting the good news form us and shape us to his purpose makes all that possible.

And because Jesus is The Bread of Life, it means that in Christ we are fed by the same bread, the same faith is a common feast that unites us. That is what makes the Church, the Church, no matter how fractious or fragile we look or feel at times. As one scholar said, "We're not Christians because we call ourselves Christians. We are Christians because we are baptized into love and community; throughout our life we are nourished and strengthened, body and soul, and loved and cared for in that same community of believers in Jesus Christ. It's in that context, that we start each day, we live each day and we end each day."

Understood in this way, Jesus himself is the message that God has sent to us. He came to show us what God's love looks and feels like.

It's pretty clear here that to quote a famous Canadian, "the Medium is the message."

It's to get this essential message across that Jesus decides that this is the time to deconstruct the image of bread he's been trying to use to get through to his followers.

He wants the people to follow him not for the bread, but instead because they've seen beyond the bread to the truth. They've seen through the sign to the thing that the sign represents. St. John even goes so far as to suggest that unless they get - like really get - that Jesus is who he says he is, they haven't received God's message of love in full. If they remain focused on the sign instead of what it points to, they've literally missed the point.

After all, it's easy to do. What signs do we get stuck on rather than perceive what is the truth - usually the uncomfortable truth - beyond them?

I wonder sometimes when we as the church celebrate the Eucharist, partaking together of the bread that is everlasting, and the wine that slakes every thirst, while our neighbors in our own communities continue to suffer from malnutrition and lack of food security. I wonder about the words of love and reconciliation that we speak in our liturgies when our Indigenous neighbours bear the generational trauma of residential schools. If we are not careful to keep the main thing, the main thing, it seems that even the ultimate sign of life can become opaque unless we are diligent in keeping the message of the Gospel ever before our own eyes.

What God's love looks and feels like is the message. Jesus came to show us what God's love looks and feels like – and what that love can and will do to transform us and everyone we in turn offer it to. A Christ-centred life looks like healing, feeding, forgiveness and taking care of one another.

God's love is the message. Hasn't it always been the message? Even when we mess it up – even on the scale of King David, even when it's just so hard for the Lord to get through to us, even when we're more focused on the sign than the truth it points to, the message has never changed. God's love has never changed. The Lord loves you and the Lord loves me – every reluctant, resistant, infuriating, tone deaf, willfully blind and disobedient hair on my head and yours.

The message that God seals within the body and blood of Jesus is a message of life. Life for everyone.

May we not only receive this life, this truth, but continue to hold that truth in front of our eyes, and be emboldened to share it with everyone we meet.

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