



JESUS AS MANNA

August 5, 2018, Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:24-35

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Following Anthony Bourdain's death in June, *The Washington Post* published a tribute to the adventurous, provocative chef and global food enthusiast. His legacy comes down to this, the article states: "People should strive to understand one another's stories and cultures. And the best way to do that is over a meal." Last October, Bourdain himself had said in an interview, "If you sit down with people and just say, 'Hey, what makes you happy? What is your life like? What do you like to eat?' More often than not," he said, "they will tell you extraordinary things, many of which have nothing to do with food."ⁱ

The passage we read this morning tells of people who have shared a meal and are now striving to understand one another. The 6th chapter of John opens with the account of Jesus feeding 5,000 people on a grassy hillside with nothing more than a boy's stash of five loaves of bread and two fish. That daytime miracle is followed by a second evening miracle—when Jesus walks on water while his disciples cross the lake in a more conventional manner—rowing in a boat. Our passage this morning follows all of that. The next day, yesterday's lunch crowd tracks Jesus down.

Now, it is an understatement to say that Jesus and these people strive to understand each other! The conversation that plays out between them in this text is as difficult as if they were from two different cultures, each speaking a foreign language. The crowd hadn't seen Jesus leave in the boat with his disciples the night before, so their opening question is pretty simple and straightforward: "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus dispenses with their question and instead seems to turn on them. Jesus says he knows why they have come looking for him. They are looking for



another free meal. They are hoping for nothing more than full bellies again, figuring him to be an endless source of meat-and-three lunches. Then Jesus starts in with one of those filmy metaphors John's Gospel is so fond of... "Do not work for food that perishes," Jesus says, "but for the food that endures to eternal life..."

It sounds lovely and certainly spiritual...but Jesus is talking to a crowd of mostly poor people who live in and around Tiberius. Their "work" is day labor in the city, or subsistence farming, fishing, maybe small-scale artisanry. These are people who work hard in the harshest environments every day just to put bread on the table.ⁱⁱ Now, because of this, they are not afraid of work, so they respond, "Okay, then what must we do to perform the works of God to get this food that does not perish?" Tell us what we have to do, Jesus, to earn the kind of food that never runs out and never goes bad. If it's a list of commandments to follow, write it down; we're really good at following the instructions, start to finish. If there are a certain number of good deeds we should do every day, let us know how many and we'll get to work right away on that.

But Jesus continues to speak in the foreign language of the Gospel: "*This* is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent."

We may be more like day traders than day laborers, but make no mistake, we are also standing in this crowd. We know what it means to work hard...to earn what we have: money, title, power, position, a roof over our heads, tuition for school, bread on the table. We know the pressure to earn enough, do well enough to keep it all going. They, *we*, we have learned to follow the recipe, to check off the list. But then comes this foreign language of the Gospel: Believe in me, Jesus says, this is the work God asks of you. Jesus desires a relationship that roots in us so deeply and grows in us and among us so fully that we cannot imagine living our lives or our life together without him; can't make sense of life without believing in him. Like this crowd, we so often ask the wrong questions; while Jesus wants to sit down at the table and ask, "Hey, what makes you happy? What is your life like? What do you like to eat?" He desires to engage us about extraordinary things, many of which have nothing to do with food.



Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion is a book by Sara Miles. She calls it “The spiritual memoir of a twenty-first-century Christian.” Sara was raised in a home with parents who were educated, cultured and atheists. Hostile toward the faith of their own upbringing, her parents decided to steep their children in great experiences, none of which involved church, even on Christmas and Easter. Sara went to an unconventional college, lived through danger in Central America, worked in restaurants in New York City, did research for a human rights organization, and eventually became a writer for various politically active groups. She was 46 and living in San Francisco when she wandered into an Episcopal church one day for no particular reason other than that she kept passing it on her daily route. Chairs were arranged around a table in the soaring space. She walk in further; then took a seat among the small group gathered there. There was singing and reading and standing up and sitting down, all of it foreign to her. Then, someone placed a piece of crumbly bread in her hands and said, “the body of Christ.”

Here is how she describes the unexpected, terrifying thing that happened next:

“Jesus happened to me. ...that impossible word, *Jesus*, lodged in me like a crumb. ...I had no idea what it meant; I didn’t know what to do with it. But it was realer than any thought of mine... And the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh. ...The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food—indeed, the bread of life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sara goes on to tell the story of how, from that meal, she began a deep relationship with Christ through feeding people, serving next to them, developing relationships. She organized a food pantry at the church, organized pantries all over the city, recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. She came to know a crazy assortment of people from day laborers to millionaires, thieves to bishops.



By serving “daily bread,” Sara came to know more deeply Jesus as the very bread of life...that which does not perish but brings us to what is eternal. She believed in the One whom God sent...and her believing brought deepened meaning and coherence to her life. Sara writes: “...at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us. ...what I hear is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and the unworthy, the screwed-up and the pious, and then commands everyone to do the same.”^{iv}

Last Sunday, the Summer Bible Study group here discussed these stories in John 6. Debbie was kind enough to share her notes with me. Together members of this church talked about the difference between being full and being satisfied. How we can chase fullness...food, happiness...but that is always temporary. Yet, when we are satisfied...what does that feel like? To know that we have been given what we need...are living in abundance enough now? I think these are important questions to ask in our lives, to be sure. But they are also vital questions for our life together, too. In what ways here together might we be chasing after or settling for temporary fullness? What are practices of faith can we try, what relationships or experiences could we explore that might bring us closer to what truly satisfies, deepen our experience of what is eternal and transformative? I don't think Jesus “turned on” the crowd that day or still to this day. Knowing how we spend most of our effort on chasing after what we need each day, Jesus interrupts us passionately and tries to redirect our attention...reminds us to seek what is eternal amidst our perishables.

A couple of years ago, one of my seminary students was engaged in a year-long internship with Broad Street Ministries in Philadelphia. Housed within the church, the ministries centered on serving people who are homeless or barely subsisting. Many who come to Broad Street suffer from trauma: the effects of poverty, addiction, PTSD, and mental illnesses. The staff and volunteers, then, are trained in trauma-informed care. I saw how this kind of care informs has altered the way they



manage the meal they serve every night. Tickets are handed out to the several hundred who come for the sit-down dinner. Because there are so many to feed, two seatings are offered. Despite having a ticket in hand, there is a fear among the guests that there will not be enough food. People get anxious, afraid, angry. So Broad Street developed the practice of inviting those in the second seating to come into the fellowship hall and sit in chairs at the front of the room while the first seating of the meal is underway. This lends assurance that they also have a place at the table. They can see there is enough food coming from the kitchen. In fact, the repeated mantra of Broad Street ministries is: “There is enough. There is enough. There is enough.” They do not speak in terms of ‘abundance,’ but they do promise, over and over again, that there is enough.

This is what Jesus goes on to promise, too, in our text today. Just as God sent manna every day when Israel was in the wilderness, so God has sent Jesus among us. He is our manna, the Bread of Life. He is present to us every day without fail, offering what is eternal to us right now. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, the guests at Broad Street, despite all we have, we worry that we might run out of what we need. Believing that Jesus is manna for us each day; that He is the Bread of Life, can transform how we choose to live and how we treat others here and now.

In the fall before he died, Anthony Bourdain was the executive producer and narrator of a documentary that looked at food waste. One-third of all food produced each year for human consumption is never eaten...that amounts to 1.3 billion tons of waste per year. All the while, so many people struggle for food each day. They make, Bourdain said, so much with so little, very proudly and generously. He remarked how delicious food can be even when there is so little to work with. He was urging to us shop more carefully, to use resources more wisely, cook more often and enjoy our food. “The way forward,” Bourdain said, “is to eat better, more delicious food, not chaw away mindlessly at this seemingly endless supply of flavorless abundance.”^v

When you come to this table today, meet the One who does not ask if you deserve the Bread of Life, but wants to know instead, “Hey, what makes you happy? What

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



is your life like? What do you like to eat?” You are invited to believe in the One who assures us there is room at this table where we talk about extraordinary things.

In the early years of the Christian faith, after the confession, “Jesus is Lord,” the second most scandalous thing about the fledgling Christian church was its table fellowship. Millionaires and day laborers, thieves and bishops, a radical new convert and a seasoned disciple, a person filled with ordinary joys and a celebrity suffering from unseen pain sat at the same table. A crumbly piece of bread was put into your hand and the person next to you said, “this is Christ’s body.” And together they discovered there is enough. There is enough. There is enough. Deep down, that must be what it is like to feel satisfied. To taste even, even a little, eternal life.

Amen.



ⁱ *The Washington Post*, “Anthony Bourdain laid it all on the table—our food and our humanity,” by Maura Judkis. June 9, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Wes Howard-Brook, **Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship** (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 154.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sara Miles, **Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion** (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 58-59; xiii.

^{iv} Miles, xvii-xviii.

^v “Anthony Bourdain Urges Americans to ‘Value the Things We Eat,’” www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/10/17/558095104