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John 6:24-35

“The Food That Endures”



Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.” Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”  
John 6:24-35

Perhaps Jesus offers no stronger rebuke for His followers in all the Gospels than what we find in this passage.

*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.*

Like the Israelites in the wilderness who looked at the manna but failed to see the God behind the manna; they see the multiplied bread, but they fail to see the one who multiplied it. In John’s Gospel, the reality of the hungry being fed and the lame walking is secondary to the purpose of the miracle – to serve as a sign of the coming redemption by God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ pointed remarks forces us to consider why we worship Him. Like the crowds, perhaps we come to meet our felt needs of hunger loneliness and fear, but Jesus calls us to Him not to make our life better but to have a better life. He is not meant to plug the holes in the dykes and dams to prevent flooding, but to build our life on an entirely new foundation – the rock of our Lord.

We humans have a penchant to fill up on the appetizers in life, distracting us from the main course.

One Thanksgiving in Magnolia, Arkansas, I decided to go all out. The turkey would be served at about 2 pm. I wanted a few appetizers before the meal, so in the midst of making the sweet potato casserole, dressing, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, homemade roles, pecan pie and more, Wendy and I decided to make

guacamole, artichoke dip, buffalo wing dip, and garlic bread to eat along the way. By the time we sat down for the turkey, after one slice, I was absolutely full. I could not eat another bite.

I had no room left for the feast. We have so filled up our lives with secondary priorities that we fail to live the true feast.

The crowd was missing the Christ because they only saw the bread. Treating Jesus like we treat doctors; they are meant to fix us when we are broken, but follow their advice about healthy eating and exercise – forget it!

But Jesus is not “*our doctor*” but *the* doctor and He is not just some bread but living bread. The actual bread He gave them is the appetizer to whet their appetite for the food that endures. Jesus’ very life; His very person is the food that endures. But unless we eat of that food, we find ourselves filling up on the junk food of life, and like eating potato chips, we will always be hungry for more.

For the longest time I believed I could not put down a bag of chips simply because I liked them so much. It was not until later learning about the glycemic index that I realized eating junk food makes you hungry for more junk food rather than filling you up! Ironically, the food industry seeks what it calls the “bliss point” – the perfect combination of fat, sugar and salt to make you want more.

Without a steady diet of the bread of life, we will find ourselves filling up, swallowing the toxic soul junk food. Like the self-reinforcing bag of chips, social media and the ladder of success in this world for so many has become a self-reinforcing mire of cynicism, judgement, greed, anger and fear, dissatisfaction, self-loathing and more. Teens and young adults are having such an impossibly difficult time because they are not being given the food that endures...

But not only that, the tragedy of lives leaping off buildings on the Upper East side speaks to a vast spiritual hole in our collective lives.

Your doctor will tell you if you have a fever, aches, and fatigue that these are symptoms of the flu or perhaps worse. You are infected. Similarly, there are spiritual symptoms that can diagnose our soul hunger.

In the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor had ascended to lofty heights in the Byzantine Empire achieving the first secretary of the Emperor Heraclius, one of the most powerful positions in the Empire. But he was drawn away from this success into the monastic life where he devoted himself to writing such marvelous works as the 400 Chapters On Love.

In one chapter, he explains the symptom of hatred:

*The one who sees a trace of hatred in [their] own heart through any fault at*

*all toward [anyone] whoever they may be, makes themselves completely foreign to the love of God, because love for God in no way admits hatred of men.*

In another he explains the symptom of contentiousness:

*The one who acts contentiously or wickedly clearly makes [themselves] a stranger to love and the one who is a stranger of love is a stranger to God since God is love.*

And yet another he speaks of slander, which seems ready made for our modern world:

*Do not lend you ear to the slanderers' tongue nor your tongue to the fault finder's ear... Otherwise you will fall away from divine love...*

If the symptoms of a life gone awry is one of despair, isolation, fear and hatred – the cure is love, unmitigated love for God and love for everyone. In another chapter he writes:

*"But I say to you," the Lord says, "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you"; why did he command these things? So that he might free you from hate, sadness, anger grudges and grant you the greatest possession of all, perfect love...*

Maximus taught that the process of this Christian life is to fully realize the image of God within us, which unites us with God. This is what Christ offers the crowd and us.

The crowd, though confused, at least knew enough to follow after Jesus and when He tells them, "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world", something clicks inside their hearts and they respond, "Sir, give us this bread always."

And He replied, "I am the bread of life."

Think about those moments in your life in which you have enjoyed the enduring bread of love, which vivifies your soul and brightens your spirit, in which after your encounter, you are left with nothing but sheer delight in God and the blessing of your neighbor.

For me it often comes through music, the blessed gift of music. It happened in Brussels a few years ago, in the Cathedral of Saint Michael.

A diminutive French-Asian woman stood, without amplification, to fill the vast stone with the voice of an angel. She wasn't especially loud, but her voice easily carried the space it was so pure. As she led a chant and sang her line with such clarity and fervor of spirit that the ascending and descending notes seem to walk us up to heaven and back down again, both uniting us with God and with one another. Though the sanctuary was

filled with many different nationalities, languages and races, we truly were made one in Christ, a moment of soul food that will feed me forever.

Now For many people this union with God happens during communion. Since God is love, if we take Jesus into ourselves, we take in this love. Catholic priests have a wonderful saying about the Mass. Something Boston College educator, Thomas Groome, told me when I was on a pilgrimage of sorts with other clergy, "Celebrate the Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass!"

If you are feeling in need of the bread that endures, the bread that opens our love for everyone while deepening our love for God, come to the table, and know the love of our Lord. Amen.