

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 6, 2006

Feeding the Hunger

John 6:10-11, 24-35

One of the things that is consistently reported in all four canonical gospels is the presence of a large crowd following Jesus here and there.

The multitude, referred to simply as “the crowd,” flocks to Jesus, gathers around him, follows him everywhere, presses in upon him as he walks through villages, sometimes threatening in mob-like fashion to take Jesus by force and make him their king, and never giving Jesus a moment’s rest, so that he has to retreat up into the mountains to pray, or escape in a boat across the sea.

This crowd stands in stark contrast to the experience of any mainline church trying to do ministry in Jesus’ name in our current American context (even the mainline congregations, like this one, who are actually managing to attract new members). In fact, it would be hard to find a crowd like the one in the gospel gathering around Jesus in *any Western* context these days. If we want to find the crowds today that are most like the crowds of the gospels we would probably have to travel to the African continent which is easily, by far, along with Asia, the growing center of gravity for Christianity today.

You might object that there are the large crowds that flow into a number of evangelical mega-churches in America, but one wonders about that anomaly, and how long it can really last in our culture. Personally, I wonder how many people in that crowd are actually attracted by the Jesus of the gospels, and how many are really more attracted by the large American flags that drape the sanctuary, or the large screens with PowerPoint projections of fighter jets flying over a hilltop full of crosses to the sound of God Bless America,

as has been reported of some of these churches.
I wonder how much this Top Gun Messiah,
has to do with the Jesus of the gospels.
And what motivation is at work in the hearts of the crowds
when worship is hardly distinguishable
from a partisan political convention?

Well, it is certainly true that only God knows the motivations
of men and women youth and children,
who gather into sanctuaries across our globe today.
And God is the only judge.

But that *is* the very question that Jesus raises
with the great crowd that follows him across the sea.
And so it is a question that we might ask in general terms
about the Christians of our day,
and a question that we certainly should ask, with honesty,
about *our own hearts*
Given the many other more stimulating, more entertaining,
more relaxing, or more lucrative options,
Why are we here in church right now? What are our motives?
Why do we seek after Jesus? What are we looking for?

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For the crowd that follows Jesus in the Gospel of John,
the reason has to do with hunger.
Jesus has just miraculously provided all 5000 of them with their dinner.
So when they approach Jesus he tells them their motive for coming,
*"Very truly, I tell you,
you are looking for me, not because you saw signs,
but because you ate your fill of the loaves."*

Kind of like our dear white Labrador Retriever Lucy,
who loves to be in our company any time,
but especially when the breakfast bacon is in the frying pan,
or the cheese has just been pulled out to put on the sandwiches.

I've always been advised that
"The way to a Presbyterian's heart is through the stomach."
If you want Presbyterians to show up to an event,
make sure you feed them,
and none of this skimpy Lenten fasting business either,
make sure there's plenty of peanut butter pie as a closer.

The difference is,
we're not relying on that meal to keep from going hungry.
The crowd that Jesus fed was a bit more desperate.
They had no easy alternative:
no Eat-n Park or Subway or Vocelli's to save the day,
only Jesus.

And this Jewish crowd has no difficulty ,
making the link between this miracle and the story of their ancestors
who were refugees in the desert,
having just fled en masse from Pharaoh in Egypt,
and who would have suffered a disastrous humanitarian crisis
had not God fed them with manna from heaven.

This really is a huge difference between us and our biblical counterparts,
between modern American religious experience
and the religious experience of the ancient biblical crowds.

It's interesting to ponder how –
in our situation today as well-fed, well-dressed, quickly transported,
air-conditioned, internet connected, leisure-addicted
modern American Christians –
how our *motivations* for seeking Jesus may have changed.

We certainly don't have to gather as Presbyterians to be fed.
Nor, for that matter, do our ministries to the hungry
result in a crowd flooding our sanctuaries.

In fact, given the elaborate global economy,
and the complex, high-tech mechanisms facilitating
supply and demand, production and delivery and consumption,
it's usually hard for us to see what, if anything,
God or Jesus has to do with the food that ends up on our table,
or with the roof over our heads.

It is easy for us modern people to feel rather self sufficient.

Moreover, with the highest general standard of living in world history,
we should be some of the most content people ever.
But are we?

Is there not underneath the surface
a high level of discontent, dissatisfaction, restlessness
in America?

We have insatiable wants (which we call needs)
and we want them met, and met now, in abundance.
And if we find – which we inevitably do –

that we cannot consume the food
or clothes or cars or houses or entertainment
at the rate we want them,
if we have to be denied the latest fad or fashion
in any of the commodities we desire,
we feel deprived – we feel *empty*.

So, across the centuries, Jesus words still cut to the quick when he says
*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.*

* * * * *

In his new book *The Luminous Dusk*,

Professor Dale Allison raises the question of
how modern life is affecting our spiritual lives.

Our technological advances –

which insulate us more and more from the natural world,
which keep us inside more than outside,
which fill every nook and cranny with artificial light,
which produce comfortable, artificial environments for us to live in,
which bring food easily to our tables, if we can pay for it,
which fills our ears with constant noise,
and our eyes with incessant visual stimuli,
and our hearts with all kinds of entertaining excitement –
what is this environment doing to our spirits?

Have we sacrificed our souls to the comfort our progress brings us?

What happens to a sense of wonder

for people who seldom anymore gaze at the stars,
mostly because we can't see many of the stars
past the glow of our electric light?

How does a culture of incessant background noise,
a culture that is terrified of too much silence,
how does this culture listen to God?

Why are we afraid of silence, of being alone

without the radio or TV or CD player or iPod
pumping noise into our ears?

Dale observes that "people seek [diversion and distraction].

As a general rule, they do not wish to be alone,
to contemplate themselves, to deprive the senses...
We cannot bear darkness, silence, stillness.

We crave movement, sound, activity.”ⁱ

Doesn't it make sense that the more man-made stuff you have in your life
to work with, to play with, and to worry about,
the more you will be distracted from
the mysterious, silent presence of your Creator.

And we are working harder and harder these days
to accumulate more and more of these distractions:
We take on second jobs, or send both spouses to work,
because we believe we need this stuff to be happy.

It is astonishing to think that
the average middle class American man at the turn of the last century
had one or two work shirts and one or two nice, Sunday shirts,
and that was all he needed.

I'm embarrassed to tell you how many shirts hang in my closet.

How about you?

How many shirts? shoes? dresses? skirts? sweaters? socks?
pair of shoes? TVs in your home? computers? appliances?

Do you have the same problem I do of where to store all those
owner's manuals – and how to find the right one
when you need to read how to fix the thing?

Do not work for the food [or any of the stuff] that perishes,

Our lives of frenzied consumption leave us haggard and empty –
in fact, our lifestyles leave us in a state of spiritual malnutrition,
and our souls are at risk of death by starvation.

We are lost in the desert, dazed by the shimmering sands of technology,
living in a mirage, desperately hungry and thirsty,
and we are shoveling dry dust of material goods
into our mouth and lungs.

We are in desperate need of a Savior
to show us the way back to the refreshing waters
and lush green life of the oasis,
the oasis which is the presence of the living God.

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Jesus says

I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

It is possible to exist in the spiritual mirage, shoveling in the sand,
all of your life, and not know it.
In today's developed world, we need not sup on the bread of life
in order to live a comfortable, even luxurious life.
We no longer need to rely on the mysterious provision of the Creator
as our ancestors once did.
If we can find a way to make the money,
we can buy pretty much what we want.

But IS comfort, and consumption, eating and drinking and playing games,
really what human life is all about – is it all we are meant for???

We have 80 plus years, if we live a full life,
and those last years as we age
are increasingly restricted and limited,
with not as many pleasures and distractions;
In those last years we have time to reflect on what we've done,
or not done,
what we've been, who we've been with,
and *to whom our lives have mattered.*

Will we look back on a life of work, work and more work
for the sake of purchase and consumption and comfort
and leisure and distraction.

Or will we have lived out our lives on this earth *with God,*
in communion with Christ, inspired by the Spirit?

Will we have spent all our time and energy,
working for the food that perishes
or will we know the taste of
the food that endures for eternal life?

The crowd said, *Give us this bread always.*

Jesus said, *I am the bread of life.*

We don't like to wait for food, or work too hard for it.
The other day at Burger King,
I had to stand in line for 30 minutes for a hamburger.
I was irritated.
This was the USA, and it was slower than Mexico
from which I had just returned.
Who ever heard of waiting 30 minutes at a fast food restaurant?

We don't do waiting well.

But the bread of life is not a fast food commodity.
It is a spiritual relationship with God, through the Son.
It's long term. It takes time out of your week, it reroutes your money.
It means Sunday has to be more than just a family day,
it must also be a *worship day*.
But the return on this investment is eternal life –
and the return begins now, in a life that is more truly human,
more genuinely alive.

Regardless of why you came here today,
I hope you leave with a new awareness of your hunger,
and a new resolve to feed it with the food
that gives life to the soul.

ⁱ Dale Allison, *The Luminous Dusk*, (Eerdmans, 2006), p. 34