

(John 6:24-35 NRSV)

²⁴ So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ 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."

²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that

we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

I Can Get Some Satisfaction

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: John 6:24-35

Back in 1965 the Rolling Stones wrote one of the most popular rock and roll songs of all time. It appeared on the album, "Out of Our Heads." You may remember the song. It was called "Satisfaction," but it has been known better by its full, beating refrain, "I can't get no satisfaction." The song opens with that refrain, and then goes on to say, "cause I try and I try and I try and I try."

Who of us hasn't at one time or another known that feeling? I try and I try and I try, and no matter how hard I try, I'm still unhappy, or still depressed, or still unfulfilled, or still feeling like there must be more to life, or still hungering after that one thing, thinking that if I but have that thing, my life will be perfect.

Tell me, what would make your life perfect today? Winning Mass Millions? Or at least enough money so you wouldn't have to worry or get out of bed if you didn't want to? A job you like? A good home life? If you're having trouble thinking of what would make your life perfect, the television advertisers will help you. They know that what you want is to be young forever, enjoying a great beer in the mountains, with lots of very attractive people. Or maybe just a nice dinner at Legal Sea Foods would make you happy.

This last seems to be what the crowd in this morning's scripture thought it would take to make their life perfect.

Yesterday at the Sea of Galilee they had eaten their fill. There they were, out in the countryside, a huge crowd that had come to see Jesus. There they were, caught up in the activity of the day, and suddenly, it was time to eat. Time to eat and there was nothing to eat. They were in a grassy field by the sea with no town in sight. And as Philip the realist had said, it would have taken six month's wages to buy enough for them each to have but a small amount to eat, even had there been a place to buy it. There they were, no food at the wrong time of day to be without food.

And then Jesus took the boy's five barley loaves and three fish and fed five thousand people with twelve baskets left over.

I should digress here for a moment. There was a political decision facing Jesus yesterday. Philip named it pretty well. Philip looked out at the multitude

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and did a quick calculation. He saw five thousand people, did a little multiplication, and concluded that it would take six month's wages to feed them all a meager meal, and a meager meal wouldn't really solve their hunger.

Philip looked at Jesus, he looked back out at the multitude, then back to Jesus. Philip described for Jesus the high cost versus the small benefit and said, "Master, I don't think we ought to raise any new taxes. Better send them home and let them get their own bread." In our time it's a complicated problem, to be sure. How do you justify the cost of programs that don't seem to solve much? Is it really a good idea to give help to people, or are they better off if they learn to take care of themselves? And, for goodness sake, look how much money it would take to help so many! I suppose I'm just a cynic, but like Colin Powell said in Philadelphia, it's hard to miss the outcry from some about the cost of social welfare and the deafening silence from those same quarters at the billions spent for corporate welfare.

Jesus made the decision to offer those in need abundance. I don't know exactly how we translate that into our contemporary situation. But I do know that Jesus rejected the idea that it was too costly to care for people, and when he did, he ended up with more food than he started with. I don't know exactly how we make that work today, but I'm pretty sure Jesus, the living Christ, is still telling us that that's the way it is supposed to go.

But that was yesterday. Jesus fed the five thousand. The next day, today, the crowd is then looking for him. Just like the anti-welfare folk worried, they have become dependent. Where's that man who gave us our fill yesterday? We're hungry again.

Jesus tells them straight out what he sees. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." And then Jesus points something else out to them. He says, essentially, Look, you needed to be fed yesterday, just as you do today. That's not a bad thing. But notice, this food which you think will satisfy you will satisfy you for only a short time and you will be hungry again. That's part of how being alive works. It's necessary to meet these needs, but it is far from everything.

Jesus might have gone on to say, Remember Esau. Esau came in from the field so famished that he gave his birthright to his twin brother Jacob in trade for a good meal. Maybe Esau had no choice, but the meal was gone the next day. The birthright lasted a lifetime.

This is a fabulously interesting story. The people are hungry and in need of food. Jesus, over the objections of those who think it costs too much and doesn't do that much good, feeds them. But then the next day, he tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

Jesus is no idiot. He knows that you can't go after the spiritual food, the eternal food, the food that truly sustains you if your belly is empty, or if you are

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malnourished in any of a number of ways. Go back to that list of what you thought would make you happy: money, a good relationship, a good job, respect from people, help when you are down, food when you are hungry. Jesus knows these things are important, and that's why he fed the five thousand people yesterday.

But Jesus also knew that these things too easily become the be all and end all in our pursuit of the good life. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." The people who needed to be fed yesterday, and were, have now come chasing after Jesus, believing if he would but feed them bread and fish every day, they would be satisfied.

But Jesus knows, Jesus knows that they would soon be singing the words from the Rolling Stones, "I can't get no satisfaction, 'cause I try and I try and I try and I try." Notice that the lyrics say "'cause I try, and I try," not just, "and I try, and I try." I can't get no satisfaction, 'cause I try and I try and I try to get it from the things that ultimately are not where satisfaction is to be found.

And it's not just a problem of continually butting your head against a wall. It's not that you just eat a meal each day and then wonder that you are hungry the next. The problem is, you start thinking, well, maybe I just didn't eat enough yesterday. So you eat more today, and when that doesn't work, you eat more tomorrow. And when that still doesn't work, you eat a bigger meal the next day, and on and on it goes.

Maybe I need more money, a younger woman, more status, a bigger house, and when they don't work, or at least don't last, well then, I need even more money, more younger women, more status and an even bigger house. And like the crowd that clamored breathlessly all the way around the Sea of Galilee looking for Jesus, you become frantic in pursuit of satisfaction in the wrong places, believing it's just that you haven't gotten enough yet. What a treadmill that is. And what a waste of a good life it is, too.

So Jesus tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." And the people seem ready. They do not object. But they want to know a very understandable thing. They want to know just where one finds this food that endures, and doesn't run out.

Jesus's answer is perhaps no surprise: "That you believe in him whom [God] sent." Jesus answers that one finds the food that endures eternally by believing in Jesus.

Now, I think that's probably right, probably right the way Jesus meant it. But I cannot think of another sentiment, another religious directive that has been more disastrously misconstrued than that one. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Does it mean that if you believe in Jesus, that you will please God, and because you please God you will be given eternal happiness? Does it mean that you have to believe the right religion to be in the in group, the group that will be saved?

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Does it mean that if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that somehow you will be given everything you want in life? Does believing in Jesus mean belonging to the right fraternity for eternity?

My God, how foolish are these ideas. And yet, and yet, they form the heart of so much religious ideology. The heart of so much religious thinking today is that if you say you believe in Jesus, you are saved; and a sign that you believe in Jesus, is that you hate any number of others as abominations. Such thinking makes a joke of God. It has God sitting up there with a black notebook writing down in columns, "Let's see, Jane, she believes in me. I like her. But Bill, Bill doesn't believe in me. I think I'll just have to fry Bill." What kind of God is that?

But look at what Jesus says to the crowd. He tells them that believing in God means recognizing that the manna that came down from the sky in the wilderness came from God, not from Moses. That is, sustaining life comes from God, not from that list of things we thought will make us happy, nor from joining the right religious society. Sustaining life comes from letting it touch your heart that after we have striven for the things we need to live, the ultimate in life comes as a gift we must simply accept. And when we learn to turn our hearts from frantic striving, to open embrace of the presence of God, then, and only then, will the aching hunger of the soul be quieted.

It takes a very different posture from our normal way of engaging the world. So much we do is about accomplishment and acquisition, and I don't want to sell that short. But the irony is this: the ultimate cannot be accomplished or striven for or acquired. It must simply be absorbed. And the belief Jesus talks about is the first step. It is believing that our deepest hungers are satisfied, satisfied not temporarily but permanently, by something quite different from how we satisfy our daily needs. If we understand the difference we are well on our way to changing the old Rolling Stones song to say, "I can get some satisfaction, 'cause I don't grasp, and I don't grab, and I don't clutch." Or, "I can get some satisfaction, 'cause I believe, and I pray, and I trust in the one who gives that satisfaction." Thanks be to God. Amen.

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