**August 2, 2015 – 10th Sunday after Pentecost**

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“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry…”

This one simple declarative sentence, the first of the seven “I am” statements in the Gospel of John, is at the center of this entire chapter. Or maybe it would be more correct to say that “bread” is at the center, and Jesus is at the center of the bread. And since the miracle associated with this declaration of Jesus, the feeding of the 5,000, is the middle of the seven signs listed in John, it further reinforces the fact that Jesus is always at the center of the Gospel.

Remember last week when I talked about one of the unique aspects of John’s version of the feeding of the 5,000 being that it is Jesus, himself, who hands out the bread and fish? Now we get around to why that’s important, as Jesus explains to the crowd.

Imagine running around after Jesus and forgetting or unable to eat. Imagine Jesus feeding you until you’re satisfied. Imagine waking up the next morning, perhaps expecting a fine breakfast, only to find that he and his disciples are gone. Since you know he’s been hanging out at Capernaum on and off, you take off to find him there.

The question, “Rabbi, when did you come here,” might contain confusion about his comings and goings since no one saw him get on the disciple’s boat, or it might contain a veiled criticism about his abandoning the crowds he claimed to care for. And Jesus’ response, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves,” might also be a scold because all the crowd seemed to be interested in was the food.

Or maybe not. This is the same crowd on whom he had compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he takes this opportunity to teach them, to bring them further into God’s plan. This is only the start of the conversation, not the end. What both the feeding miracle and this conversation is leading up to is, “I am the bread of life.”

But before he can get there, he needs to get them to thinking about something other than their stomachs. Jesus tells them, “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.”

And to the crowd’s credit, rather than saying, “Hey, I want some of that enduring bread. I’m sick of baking every day and anything left over is hard as a rock,” they make the next logical leap and ask what they must do to do the works of God, and presumably earn some of this bread.

They still might be confused about what Jesus is talking about here, and think that if they do the works of God, whatever those might be, they would be paid in this wonderful bread that never goes bad. But again, Jesus sets them straight. He tells them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” In other words, believe in Jesus, God’s son.

As an aside, I want to say a little about John’s word usage in this passage, because I don’t think it’s an accident. I’ll preface that by saying that Greek to English translation is often sort of slippery, especially when you add in 2,000 years of cultural shift along with the language difference. But that having been said, when the crowd asks, “What must we do to perform the works – plural – of God?” Jesus answers, “This is the work – singular – of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

It’s a tiny change – one letter in English, two letters in Greek – but I think it gets to the heart of what Jesus is talking about here. The crowd talks about works, as in individual tasks that have a beginning and an end, and a quid pro quo payment schedule. But Jesus talks about work, in the sense of an ongoing, lifelong commitment. The work he’s talking about here is not physically demanding or complicated, but it requires all of our being and dedication to undertake.

But back to the crowd. Oftentimes, John’s use of dialogue and discourse makes the people that Jesus is talking to seem like, to put it kindly, idiots. This is probably on purpose so that when they finally get it, as this crowd does eventually, it’s all the more dramatic. But at this point in the conversation, the crowd is still a bit clueless, AND they’re starting to challenge Jesus. After all, they had been talking about making him king so they wanted to make sure he really was the man for the job.

“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” they ask, conveniently forgetting ,in the way of crowds everywhere, that he had just fed all of them with five loaves and two fish less than 24 hours before. “Sure you fed us all yesterday, but what are you going to do for us today?” Not unlike the disciples, having witnessed all kinds of healings, saying “Who IS this?” when Jesus calms the storm.

And the crowd doubles down by referring to Moses and the manna in the desert. Though it’s not clear whether they understand what the scripture from Exodus says, that it’s God who provides the manna to the Israelites, Jesus takes the opportunity to remind them of that fact and goes on to say, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

And finally the crowd starts to get it. For now, at least. And like the Samaritan woman at the well, whose story parallels this one, says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty,” the crowd says, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

And Jesus finally says, “I am that bread, and I’m giving myself to you so that you’ll never be hungry or thirsty again. All you have to do is believe.”

All we have to do is believe. Simple, right? Not so much!

There’s a lot packed into that one little word, believe. Jesus is not just telling us believe that he can conjure bread out of nowhere to feed the multitudes, although obviously that’s part of this story. He’s saying that who he is, is the source of life for those who believe in him. He’s saying that through his incarnation, through his life, death, and resurrection, he has replaced our earthly food with heavenly sustenance. He’s the one thing we can’t live without. That’s a lot to take in, literally.

The temptation is to make all of these bread of life passages about the Eucharist. It’s almost unavoidable, so I won’t try to avoid it. A common saying in the church is that sacraments are always effective. In other words, when we pray in thanksgiving and ask the Holy Spirit to turn the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, that truly happens.

But taking communion can’t make us believe. Believing, like loving, is an action verb. It’s something we have to decide to do. To believe in Jesus is to shape your life around him. To believe in Jesus is to follow in his footsteps – feeding the poor, healing the sick, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison.

It means to live like Jesus – loving your neighbors and your enemies, alike. It means praying – praying every day, both alone and in community – just as Jesus prayed. And it means laying down your life for your friends, and following Jesus even to the cross. It’s not easy. It’s work – sometimes hard work – but it’s the work of God. If we’re going to be disciples of Christ, this is the path we have to take.

But here’s the thing. You’re allowed to back out. You’re allowed to walk away with just a piece of fresh bread and some fish in your pack, or a taste of the Body and Blood of Jesus, and call it good. But if you turn back to him, if you believe just a little bit, Jesus is there, continuously offering himself as sustenance, the food and drink of unending life. It’s our choice to make.

And it IS worth it.

Amen.