

Hillcrest Congregational United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
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A Free Meal

Last week we read the version of the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 from the Gospel according to John. The crowds were so impressed with Jesus, they were going to take him by force to make him king. Jesus eludes them, and walks across the water to his disciples. Now the crowds have found him again.

They ask him the obvious question, “Rabbi, how did you get here?” But Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he challenges them with a statement about why they were looking for him in the first place. He noticed they called him Rabbi, perhaps to flatter him. But he doesn’t let them get away with it. He says, “You weren’t impressed by my ministry, you are just looking for a free meal!” Jesus then takes the whole encounter up a notch and turns it into a true teaching moment. He 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.”

Jesus has just told them he is the representative of God. The people in the crowd take Jesus’ bait. But they aren’t going to commit themselves yet. They ask him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” They want to know what kind of work it will take to get the food that lasts for eternity.

Jesus answers, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” Your work is to believe in me. That’s it? You’d think they’d jump at it. After all, their prophecies say that God will send a Messiah, an anointed one. But they say, “What sign are you going to give us? What work are you performing? They have had false “messiahs”. They don’t want to be fooled- they want proof.

We might ask, didn’t Jesus just feed 5000 people with 5 loaves and two fish? Isn’t that a sign? But for them it is not enough- because they have a story of a much greater miracle- “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Moses gave them manna- bread from heaven. Out of nowhere this bread just started raining from the sky. And it wasn’t just one meal for 5000 people, it was enough to feed hundreds of thousands of Israelites, three meals a day the whole time they were in the wilderness!

But Jesus reminds them, “...it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.” For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Here Jesus is not only setting them right on where the bread came from- God. He is also telling them that the Israelites had Moses the prophet, a servant of God, and they received physical bread. But Jesus calls God his father, and now they can receive the true bread of eternity.

They ask, “give us this bread always.” And Jesus replies, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Now, I want to caution you. There should be a flashing red light here. The meal is freely given, but it is not a free meal.

As we study the Gospel according to John you may notice that it is different than the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Although there are similarities, there are many differences. Different stories, different language, and Jesus talks about himself differently. I am the bread of life, the way, the truth and the life, the living water.

Remember that the Gospel writers wrote from their own perspectives about their experience of Jesus and what it meant to them. They wrote in different times to different communities, using words, symbolism and language that would be meaningful to their people. This does not mean that any one of the Gospels are more “right” than the other, anymore than one person’s experience of God is more right or wrong than another persons. There is something real and true and important for us to understand in each of the Gospels about Jesus.

Scholars believe that the Gospel according to John was written to a community where their thinking was influenced by a Gnostic philosophy rather than, or as well as, traditional Jewish teachings. Their perspective may have been more metaphysical, mystical, and metaphorical. Their understanding of the separation between the spirit and the flesh was more dualistic.

The goal for their spirituality was one of enlightenment by knowledge revealed by a special messenger from God. Among many other things, Jesus was a special messenger from God and in this Gospel there may be special messages, revealed only to those who search in truth.

But today as we look at this story let us put ourselves in the place of the crowd. We have the same physical and spiritual needs as those in the crowd. Did they come just to be fed another meal or were they searching for more? The crowds were physically hungry, and Jesus satisfied them, but he also challenged them to seek and be filled with spiritual food too.

Do we approach God with the expectation of having our basic needs met? We are not called into community for only the simple comforts of companionship and assurance of salvation. We called are to seek spiritual food that challenges our taste buds and is sometimes hard to digest. We are challenged to engage with the hard questions of life and faith, to risk doubt and to seek God's answers.

Here's a hard question. This week I heard a story comparing our country to all the others in the world. We are the richest country in the world, but unfortunately that does not buy us much. We rank far behind all other countries in measures of wellness- length of life, level of crime, rate of drug and alcohol abuse and other mental health problems, infant mortality, incarceration rates, education scores.

One explanation is that there is a 10-1 gap in income between the richest and the poorest people in our country. In the other countries the gap is only 3-1. We are called to ask why?! We are tasked with asking the questions about what our role as individuals and as the Hillcrest church is in building the beloved community of God, in creating justice and ensuring that the least among receive justice and have enough to eat.

Just as the crowds worried after another another meal, when the people were with Moses in the desert, God fed them but they kept worrying. No matter how much or little they gathered they had exactly what they needed for the day. If they hoarded it to tried to store it overnight, it rotted. They had to rely on God anew each day for their "daily bread." God provides our daily bread. Sometimes we forget this, and like the Israelites, forget to rely on God. We need to spend time thanking God for all the blessings we have and seeking ways to share them.

The crowds saw Jesus feed 5000, yet they wanted to see a bigger miracle. We do this too. But we must cease spending our time praying frantically to God for bigger miracles to fix

things in our lives, or conversely run around by ourselves to try to make everything just right in our lives, and instead pay attention to the everyday “simple” miracles.

And when God fed the people in the desert, and when the crowds came to Jesus, it might have seemed that the food was free. But it was not a free meal. There was work involved. For the Israelites the work was collecting the manna.

For the crowds it was believing in the one God sent. It might seem like the crowds got off light. And all we have to do is believe like them, right? No. Jesus was calling them to faith. Jesus was calling them and us to discipleship. Believing is an easy piece of work. But to truly follow is something different indeed- Jesus said, “take up your cross and follow me, love your neighbor as yourself and pray for your enemy, do for others as you would have them do for you.”

And the Israelites didn't get off easy either, they were asked to rely on God and to keep the covenant- Love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart, strength and spirit, and your neighbor as yourself. The Israelites and the crowds found out, it is hard work. It is not a free meal. But once you have tasted the bread of heaven, the bread of eternal life, you will not be satisfied with anything less.

Amen.