

“What Are You Looking For?”

John 6:22-35

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There's a song that's been running through my head as I have been preparing this sermon. The name of it is “Show Me What I'm Looking For” by a group called Carolina Liar. I don't expect that all of you will have heard it, but I'm sure there are at least some here who have. The chorus of the song says, “Save me, I'm lost. O Lord I've been waiting for you. I'll pay any cost. Save me from being confused. Show me what I'm looking for. Show me what I'm looking for.” This song isn't part of the Christian music scene. It's played on CD101 and shown on MTV. It's a universal cry for fulfillment. Save me. I'm lost. Show me what I'm looking for.

The crowd of five thousand people had just been fed. The miracle that Jesus performed was over. He had left to be by himself, the disciples had taken a boat for Capernaum, and the crowd lingered. The next day, the crowds saw there was only one boat gone, and they knew Jesus hadn't gone with the disciples. They found some more boats and headed over to Capernaum to find Jesus and the disciples. When they go there, they saw Jesus with the disciples and asked, “When did you get here Jesus?”

Thus begins a really interesting and very illuminating conversation between Jesus and the crowd. It's a conversation in which Jesus claims to be the bread of life – the bread from heaven that gives life. In order to fully understand this concept, we need to remind ourselves of the story of the manna from heaven that was a part of Israel's history as told in Exodus 16.

Moses had just parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape from Pharaoh's army, and the Israelites were at the very beginning of their travels in the wilderness to the promised land. Just two and a half months into the journey, the people started complaining. They were hungry. They were so hungry that they started whining to Moses, saying “Why didn't God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death!”¹

Well, God heard their complaints, and God said to Moses, “Here's what I'm going to do for you. I'm going to rain down bread from heaven called manna. Each day, along with the morning dew, there will be these seeds like coriander that the people will be able to gather. They can take as much as they want and they'll have enough for the day. No more, no less. Don't bother storing some up overnight because I'll provide what you need again the next day. On the sixth day, you'll have enough for two days so that you can rest on the Sabbath according to my law. The whole point of this is to see whether they'll live according to my teaching or not.” As Moses always did, he relayed God's message to the people.

¹ Exodus 16:3 (The Message)

So what did the Israelites do? The first day, the manna appeared and they gathered it up. Some gathered a little of the manna, some gathered a lot, but when they measured what they had, those that had gathered more didn't have any extra and those that gathered less weren't short. Each person had what they needed – in accordance with the abundant nature of God.

Some people didn't listen though. Some of them kept their manna overnight just in case. The next morning, it was all wormy and it smelled bad. Others didn't listen to the commandment about the Sabbath and went looking for manna on the Sabbath, but they couldn't find any.

The manna kept them alive for the forty years they travelled through the wilderness. God's daily bread from heaven kept them nourished, healthy, and able to continue their journey. Of course, at one point some folks got tired of the manna. Numbers 11 records a scene where some of the riff-raff among the people began complaining, saying "Why can't we have meat? We ate fish in Egypt – and got it free! – to say nothing of the cucumbers and melons, the leeks and onions and garlic. But nothing tastes good out here, all we get is manna, manna, manna."²

The story of the manna reminded the Israelites of the importance of seeking God and trusting God daily. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus encourages us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread." This phrase is a reminder of the story manna from heaven. Give us what we need to get through today, no more, no less. We trust that you will provide what we need to survive, to get through the journey. So help us to be satisfied with what we have.

Well let's get back to the conversation Jesus has with the crowd in today's text. When we left off, the crowd had asked Jesus "When did you get here?" Jesus completely dismisses their question and gets to the real heart of the matter. He says to them, "You're not looking for me because of the miracle you experienced that could have pointed you toward God. No, you're looking for me because you got your stomachs filled when you were with me. Don't look to me for the food that perishes, look to me for the food that endures forever."

Jesus knows that the crowd is looking for him again in order to get something material from him. They wanted more bread, something that doesn't last. They weren't seeking him for anything enduring, they were seeking him because he fed their physical need. In a way, they were simply using Jesus to get what they wanted.

There was a name in nineteenth-century China (and perhaps all over Asia) for persons who came to church because they were hungry for material food. They converted, were baptized, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their prospects improved

² Numbers 11:4 (The Message)

and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Therefore, the missionaries called them “rice Christians.”³

The challenge from today’s text, the call to Christian Discipleship, is to take an honest assessment of ourselves and ask, “When I turn to Jesus, when I look to God, what am I looking for?” In what ways are we like the people seeking Jesus to have their fill of the loaves, instead of seeking Jesus for the fulfillment of their lives? In what ways might we be like the “rice Christians?”

One author wrote that “The crowds that followed Jesus to Capernaum to find him after he fed the five thousand in the wilderness are like those who see faith and church membership instrumentally, as something they can choose for themselves to use for their own needs or to pursue their own interests.”⁴ Isn't that what sometimes happens in our own walk with God? When we invite God into our lives, aren't we sometimes thinking, "What can you do for me?"

Twelfth century mystic Meister Eckhardt warned that "Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow, and to love him as they love their cow. They love their cow for the milk and cheese and profit it makes them. This is how it is with people who love God for the sake of outward wealth and inward comfort. They do not rightly love (God) for their own advantage."

God is not simply some Cosmic Crutch propping us up, making our life easier, lending us a hand when we need it. Neither is God simply a divine "Mr. Fix-it," waiting around idly until we need someone to extricate us from some crisis we have created in our lives. Those who see God as such a "Fix-it" often have a prayer-life that resembles dialing 911: "Need to hit all green lights in order to get to your meeting on time? ... Is your team losing with six seconds to go in the game? ... Will your spouse hit the roof if she/he finds out you've bounced another check? ... For these and other emergencies pray 911 and the magic Mr. Fix-It god will swoop down and change those lights, dunk that ball, and hide that bank statement."

Jesus says in our text today that “The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” When the people hear him say that, they say, “That sounds wonderful. Give us that bread always!” Jesus responds, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

How do we lay claim to the offer that Jesus gives to never be hungry and never be thirsty just by coming to him and believing in him? What will it take to satisfy our desires forever? I think it’s a matter of perspective and paying attention. It’s about what we’re paying attention to and why. Let me illustrate this with a story.

³ O. Benjamin Sparks. “John 6:24-35: Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 308.

⁴ Ibid.

A Native American was in downtown New York, walking with his friend who lived in New York City. Suddenly he said, "I hear a cricket." "Oh, you're crazy," his friend replied. "No, I hear a cricket. I do! I'm sure of it." "It's the noon hour. There are people bustling around, cars honking, taxis squealing, noises from the city. There's no way you can't hear it." "I'm sure I do."

He listened attentively and he walked to the corner, across the street, and looked all around. Finally on the corner he found a shrub in a large cement planter. He dug beneath the leaves and found a cricket. His friend was astounded. But the Cherokee said, "No. My ears are no different than yours. It simply depends on what you are listening to. Here let me show you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change—a few quarters, some nickels, and pennies. And he dropped it on the concrete. Every head within a block turned. "You see what I mean?" he said as he began picking up his coins. "It all depends on what you are listening for."⁵

Can we see and experience God in the minute aspects of life like the Native American who can hear the cricket in the bustle of New York City? Are we paying attention to God and are we tuned into God as our source of life, or are we listening for something else and relying on God to do something specific to fulfill us? What are we looking for? Is our faith only a means to an end?

One day, I came across a thought, either through something I read or through a conversation I had with a friend, and I wrote that thought down on a little piece of paper. I keep that piece of paper on the back of my desk just to the side of my computer so I will see it often. The thought on the note is this: "Is God enough, or do I want more?" It reminds me to keep an eye on my perspective. What am I looking for? Can I be happy with God alone, or do I need God to consistently do something for me? Do I love God because of what God does for me, or do I simply love God?

Friends, let us be a people who look to God as our source of life, not because of what God can do for us, but simply because God is. Let us approach our faith not as a means to an end, but as our source of life. Let us accept God's daily provision of love and grace and may that love and grace give us life abundantly. Let us be a people who can say, "God is enough. We need no more." Amen.

⁵ Craig Brian Larson, editor, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Michigan: Baker, 1993, p. 240