

“Food, Labor, and the Kingdom of God”

John 6:22-35

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Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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It was the next day after the feeding of the five thousand. The crowd was once again looking for Jesus. They realized that he was not there where they knew He had been. So they got into boats and went across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

They eventually find Him in Capernaum. It triggers a dialogue with Jesus. The dialogue takes place in terms of food, work, and the kingdom of God in relation to Jesus. The issue is trusting and loving Jesus for His own sake and not putting conditions on faith in Him in relation to purposes and things that have to do with this life, the kingdom of the world.

The people clearly state that they are putting conditions on faith in Jesus when they tell Jesus: “What sign will you do so that we may see it and believe in You? What work do You perform to convince us?” (John 6:30).

When they find Jesus, He raises the issue: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled” (John 6:26 NASB 1995). Jesus goes to say, “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for God the Father has set His seal on Him,” or we could say, has certified His approval of Him (John 6:27).

Jesus raises the question of working or laboring for the food that perishes. Does He mean that we are not supposed to work for our daily bread? No He does not mean that. Does He mean that God does not care about how things go for us in this life. No it doesn't mean that either. We know this because of the 4th petition to the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught us: Give us this day our daily bread.

It does mean that He is concerned about how we can mix up and confuse the purposes and goals of the things of life in this world with things in the kingdom of God. The result being then that conditions are put on faith in Jesus and belief in God; or, that Jesus and God are made servants of the glories of this world. Conditions would involve something like this: if things go well for me in the things of life in this world, then I will believe in Jesus. Or, if Jesus makes me successful or gives me peace in the world, then He is worth believing in and following, and such success and peace is what must happen if He is true and real.

Jesus raises these kinds of issues because He tells the people that they are seeking Him because he filled their stomachs with food. This is the food that perishes. They were not seeking Jesus because of the signs He did.

Those signs were the miracles He had been doing, in healing people, and then the feeding of the five thousand itself. The purpose of those signs was to reveal who He is as God the Son in the flesh; that He is the one who has come down from heaven, the one whom God the Father has sent to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

God the Father gave Jesus authority to do those signs to certify that Jesus had God's approval. These signs were done by Jesus without the question that asks Him for a sign on demand to prove to a person's satisfaction why they should believe in Him. These signs were done on Jesus's own initiative for purposes of revelation; revelation of who He is; revelation of His love and compassion so that we believe in Him as God's Son in the flesh; revelation of the future restoration He will bring to broken humanity in resurrection and new creation.

Jesus raises the issue of working for the food that perishes because the people were not pursuing Him because they saw the signs He did for the reasons He did them. If they had been pursuing Jesus because of the signs, for the reasons He did them, then they would have been pursuing Jesus for His own sake; for Jesus's own purposes and the food He came to bring. That is the point: pursuing Jesus and His kingdom for its own sake. But they were getting things mixed up. They were seeking Jesus to be the guarantee for them of the food that perishes. Pursuing Jesus for that reason is getting things mixed up.

What is this food that perishes? In the immediate context, it is the food that goes into the stomach and gives life and strength to their bodies. We could expand this to include anything that has to do with the things of life in this world; money, success, unity in civil society; honor; privilege; health, prosperity; everything going well, there being no difficulties, there being no suffering; Jesus affirming me as me, as I want me to be in my own self-determination. Yet, every "me" is corrupted by sin.

We can expand the food that perishes this way because at the end of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus perceived that they were intending to take Him by force and make Him king (John 6:15). You can understand why. "Hey, this guy can feed all of us with just five loaves and two fish. Just think what He could do if He were king." They were intending to use Him to pursue the aims and purposes of the kingdom of this world.

What did Jesus do? He withdrew from them.

Why is pursuing the glories of this world the food that perishes? It is because all such things are passing away. None of them is eternal. And none of them get us into the kingdom of God. Bread, for example, goes into the tummy and nourishes the body. But it only lasts a few hours, and then you need to eat again, and again. It perishes, so to speak.

But then we might say that while the bread perishes, it nourishes the body, which endures. But the body is mortal and will die. So it perishes, until it is restored in resurrection and new creation.

But all the other things perish as well, for the form of this world is passing away, says the Apostle Paul. And none of the wealth, and glory, and honor, and privilege, and legacy we could obtain in this world, transfers to the kingdom of God. If it did, we would be affirming justification by works. We take none of those things with us into the kingdom. We enter the kingdom on Jesus's terms, and those terms have to do with redemption from sin and death and reconciliation with God. And so Jesus identifies all those things in the kingdom of the world as the food that perishes.

It all perishes because of sin. Everything in this life has been corrupted by it. The only thing that endures is where there is the forgiveness of sin in Jesus. The only way into the kingdom of God is through the forgiveness of sins.

But the heart of the problem Jesus is talking about is making Jesus the servant of the things of the world, so that we believe in Him if He assures us of those things. The problem is conditioning faith on this. God and Jesus are useful to the extent they bring glory and satisfaction in all those things. But then Jesus and His things must be turned to serve those ends, rather than being the thing itself.

The children of Israel were having this problem. Look at what had just happened. God had just brought them through the Red Sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on the right and a wall of water on the left (Exodus 14:29). This was such a stupendous thing that modern people just can't believe it really happened. Of course, so is the resurrection of Jesus. But it did happen. God did it that way on purpose (Exodus 14:1-2).

And now it is just about thirty days later. They are running out of food. They start to grumble and complain against Moses (Exodus 16:1-2).

How could they after what they have just been through? It would have been alright for them to bring the fact to Moses's attention so that, in faith and love of God, they could pray to God for help and the solution. But they question God's motives. This is what the flesh does. God is now evil and mean: "You have brought us out into this wilderness to die. Oh how much better it would have been if we were still slaves in Egypt, still not free, but sitting next to pots of meat and having our fill of bread" (Exodus 16:3).

Being full and slaves is better than having difficulties and self-denial, along with freedom. They were not trusting and loving God for His own sake, even having experienced what He had done for them. They were not walking in the faith that the Apostle Paul expressed: whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Romans 14:8); that faith that Job expressed: The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21).

This is not necessarily an easy faith to have. We need some help. We need some food for this kind of faith. If we are to put forth effort, let it be for this food.

So Jesus teaches to labor for the food that endures to eternal life. Jesus Himself, as the Son of Man, gives this food. He is this food. He has God the Father's seal of approval. It is Jesus in whom God's purposes concerning His kingdom will be accomplished and fulfilled. We find the kingdom of God in Jesus, and in Him it does not perish, because He has made atonement for sin, because He is risen from the dead.

Jesus Himself then, the kingdom itself then, is the purpose and the glory and the joy. He is what we trust and love, and we trust and love Him for His own sake, for who He is; for what He has done. And we love that we are apart of His kingdom in Him, for its own sake, whatever may be happening in the world and the civil realm in our lives, because we have feasted by faith on the food that endures.

They ask Jesus what they must do to be doing the works of God. By "works of God" we understand what is involved in relation to God, for God's own sake, to be at peace with God and part of His kingdom. The question was couched in terms of works. Jesus answers in the same terms in which the question was put to Him, in terms of works, but He is not talking about works. It is a play on words. "This is the work of God," Jesus says, "that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29 NASB 1995). Certainly, Jesus works good things through us through such faith as its fruit; but the faith comes first and always. It is the "work" of God to believe in Jesus, and this faith is what gets us into the kingdom and keeps us there.

Why is that so? Because Jesus is the bread of life: "I am the bread of life," He says.

How can this be? Is Jesus saying that He is wheat ground into flour, mixed with a little yeast, and a little salt, and water, and then baked in the oven? No, this is quite clearly a metaphor. Our bodies need bread. Our relationship to God needs Jesus. He is the food that we need in relation to God in order to be part of His kingdom. He is the food that forgives our sins. He is the food that brings life to our mortal bodies through His Spirit. He is the food that sets our hearts right to seek first God, the things of His kingdom, and its righteousness, for its own sake, for Christ's sake, not as the means of guarantee of the glories of this world. For He Himself trusted, loved, and lived this way toward the Father who sent Him. He gave Himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin. He rose from the dead in victory over sin, death, the devil, and the world. As He is the food that feeds us, as He lives in us, we trust, and love, and live this way for His sake.

Of course, God is faithful. He knows what we need for the support and needs of our life

here. Jesus Himself taught us to pray for these things: “Give us this day our daily bread.” And out of faith in Christ we look to Him for help in these things.

But as Jesus feeds us, He leads us to keep the purposes and motives straight. He teaches our hearts to love Him and God and His kingdom for its own sake, and for the glory it gives to us in the midst of this world that is perishing, and when our course in this world is complete: that glory being eternal life in the righteousness, peace, and joy of God’s kingdom. If we stumble in keeping things straight, He picks us up as He feeds us again on Himself in His grace and peace.

May He give us this true bread always, Himself, as He meets us here through His Word and in His Sacraments in His Spirit, as we are gathered as His people.

Amen.