

I Am the Bread of Life

John 6:25-35

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2015]

I

There is a world of difference between being full and being satisfied.

Has this ever happened to you?—

It is late at night and your stomach is rumbling, so instead of going to bed, you go to the refrigerator to look for a snack.

You find yourself gnawing on a piece of cold chicken,
or digging into some leftover casserole,
or spooning up a dish of ice cream.

All the while you know inside yourself that none of it is really what you are craving.

You end up going to bed with a full stomach,
but you are far from satisfied.

Being full and being satisfied are not the same thing.

II

The world, however, tempts us to believe that they are the same.

Every day we are bombarded with hundreds of advertising messages that attempt to seduce us into believing that if we just buy a particular product, we will be filled with satisfaction in life.

So Snickers tells us, “You’re not you when you’re hungry.”

McDonald’s says if you eat their food you’ll be “Lovin’ it.”

Open a Coca-Cola and you’ll “Open happiness.”

Constantly we are tempted to believe that in order to be satisfied we have to be full,

yet fullness does not guarantee satisfaction in life.

There is a famous story of someone asking John D. Rockefeller how much money was enough.

He answered, "Just a little bit more."

Most of us live lives that are full of...*stuff*.

How much stuff do you have?

When I went to seminary I could fit all my stuff into the back of my Chevy Nova.

My wife and I moved into our house 12 ½ years ago.

We have five bedrooms full of stuff (some of it is our daughters' stuff).

In our basement are boxes that we have moved four times and never opened.

Do you ever look at the stuff in your closets, basement, or attic and ask,
"Where did all this stuff come from?"

Deep inside we are driven by a need for more.

Sometimes we are driven by a fear of not having enough.

People raised during the Great Depression had a tendency to save everything because they knew what it was to have so little.

So they hung onto items you or I might readily get rid of...
because you never know when somebody might need it.

Our society coined the phrase, "shopping therapy,"
also known as "retail therapy."

Time magazine reported on a survey that found that more than half of Americans (52%, including 64% of women and 40% of men) admit to engaging in “retail therapy”—

the act of shopping and spending to improve one’s mood.

The *Journal of Psychology and Marketing* reported that 62% of shoppers had purchased something to cheer themselves up,

and another 28% had purchased as a form of celebration.

A reality show about hoarders was a big hit on the A & E Network (TLC did a copy-cat version).

Shows like that have kept 1-800-GotJunk? in business.

Speaking of junk, there are more than 48,000 storage units in the United States, and the Self-Storage Association reports that the industry brings in more than 24 billion dollars a year (mine costs me \$62 a month).

Storage Wars is another hit reality show on A & E. (Didn’t that network used to have something to do with the arts—and TLC with learning?)

There is a growing job market for professional organizers and the National Association of Professional Organizers offers both board certification and continuing education.

There are 12-step groups for chronic clutterers.

The subtle message is constantly whispered into our souls,
telling us that fullness equals satisfaction.

But in our heart of hearts we know this is not true.

As a Bruce Springsteen song tells us:

*Everybody needs a place to rest,
Everybody wants to have a home,
Don’t make no difference what nobody says,
Ain’t nobody like to be alone,
Everybody’s got a hungry heart...*

A prayer of St. Augustine sums it all up:

*Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in thee.*

III

The drive to feel full characterized people in Jesus' day also.

Our gospel lesson takes place the day after Jesus fed over 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

It is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four gospels.

The next day the crowd went looking for Jesus,
who had gone to the lakeside village of Capernaum.

You would think that Jesus would be encouraged that so many people were seeking him.

But Jesus knew why they were there—
they saw him as their meal ticket.

They were looking for another miracle.

They were driven by a need for fullness.

Remember how in John 4 Jesus told the woman at the well that he would give her living water that would satisfy her thirst permanently.

Now Jesus tells the crowd something similar—
only this time the image is bread, not water.

He will give them something lasting and complete.

He will give them the Bread from heaven
that alone can satisfy their deepest needs.

They respond by asking,

“What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe in you?”

In other words, **what will you do for me now?**

They are not talking commitment and sacrifice;
their entire focus is on what God can do for them now through Jesus.

To them, bread was bread,
not a sign of anything more or better.

Their next meal was on their minds,
not new life.

That’s the problem with chasing fullness—
there is never enough.

We always need more,
and we are always on the lookout for the next miracle.

Not only that, but a drive for fullness makes it hard for us to enjoy what we have.

This is the insidious nature of hunger.

It makes us consumers more than enjoyers.

So they ask Jesus,

“What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’”
(6:30-31).

They were of course referring to our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, Exodus 16, when during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the children of Israel were sustained by God’s gift of manna from heaven.

They would gather it every day, but the catch was that they could only gather what they needed for that day.

They could not stockpile it or hoard it.

They could only live with the satisfaction of knowing that God would take care of them...

every day...

one day at a time.

So the crowd reminds Jesus of this....Why?

Because they want a miracle that will fill their bellies and take away all the worries from their lives.

And if Jesus really is connected to the great I AM,
then he will perform the same kind of miracle that Moses performed for the children of Israel in the wilderness.

IV

Have you ever put those kinds of conditions on God?

Have you ever thought,

If I attend worship regularly,

if I do some good deeds for others,

if I give some money to the church or to a charity,

then it ought to merit something?

Have you ever felt that a by-product of your faith should be a satisfaction that doesn't require much effort on your part?

Jesus answered the crowd this way:

“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...which...gives life to the world.” (6:32-33)

“Sir,” they said, “give us this bread always” (v. 34).

Can you hear the desperation in their request: **“Give us...always”?**

They were saying,

“Don’t let us go to bed tonight without knowing we will have all we need in the morning.”

Jean Zornes, writing in *Discipleship Journal*, related this story to her life.

She says that she assumed that Jesus’ job was taking care of all her needs and wants—jobs, roommates, a husband, and so forth.

“But after a while my tastes got fussier....When those things didn’t come, I felt as if Jesus had walked away from me. What I didn’t realize was that He had put loving distance between us. Just as He did with the crowd (by the sea that day).”

Can you relate?

Have you ever said to God, “If you’ll just give me **‘this,’** I’ll be so happy,” only to find out that the happiness expiration date on **“this”** was pretty short?

When life is just about chasing fullness,
happiness is always elusive.

There is always another want,
another crisis,
another something...
that keep us from finding deep, permanent satisfaction.

When Jesus says “I am the Bread of Life,” he is in effect telling us,

“Don’t spend your life just chasing fullness. I am come to offer you deep and abiding satisfaction, no matter what your circumstances are. I want to give you contentment and peace. Let me be your source of joy, so that no matter where you are, you can say, ‘Today is a good day...life is good. I am blessed.’”

V

Sometimes we get confused about what we think we want and what we really need.

Midas, the mythical King of Phrygia, showed hospitality to a friend of the god Bacchus

In gratitude, Bacchus said that he would grant Midas anything he wanted.

Without giving a thought to the inevitable consequences, Midas said he wanted everything he touched to turn to gold.

He was delighted with his new power until he sat down to his next meal.

Everything he tried to eat or drink turned into a lump of shiny metal.

At length, very hungry and thirsty, Midas begged Bacchus to take his power back.

Bacchus told him to go wash in the river Pactolus and he would lose the fatal gift that he wanted.

He did so, and that was said to be the reason gold was found in the sands of that river.

Here, friends, is our challenge during the season of Lent:

to focus not on what we think we want,
but on what we truly need...

to seek contentment and satisfaction in our relationship with
God,
rather than fullness to satiate our appetites.

When Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life," he reminded us of the lesson he gave during his 40 days in the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil.

Remember what the devil said to him?—

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

In other words, *turn these stones into bread so that your belly will be full.*

And do you remember how Jesus responded?—

by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy:

*“Very truly, I tell you, one does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*

Bread may fill our bellies,
but only Jesus, the Word made flesh,
can satisfy our souls.

At the end of his life, as he prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus first expressed what he wanted—
not to have to drink of the cup of suffering and death that lay before him.

Jesus did not get what he wanted.

What he needed and got was the courage to endure the suffering and death and win for himself and for us the victory over them.

We come to God asking for what we want,
and in God’s mercy we are offered what we need,
what alone will satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst.

We come to the Lord’s Table and discover that,
if we eat and drink in faith and trust,
what looks like mere bread and wine becomes Christ’s presence
in our lives in love and power.

VI

The Boss was right—*everybody’s got a hungry heart*—
and Jesus comes to satisfy our deepest hunger
and quench our deepest thirst.

The following testimony was penned by an unknown Confederate soldier. It expresses better than almost anything the blessings of the God who gives us a satisfaction that goes beyond just being full:

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.*

I got nothing that I asked for but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed.

Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

May his glorious promise be true for you as you eat the Bread and drink the Cup.

Amen.

Sources:

Fred B. Craddock, Preaching Through the Christian Year, B, Trinity Press International, 1993.

Rob Fuquay, The God We Can Know, Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus, Upper Room Books, 2014, 25-31.

J. Harold McKeithen, “What I Want and What I Need,” sermon retrieved from <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=9163>.

Kit Yarrow, “Is Retail Therapy for Real? 5 Ways Shopping Is Actually Good for You,” *Time*, April 16, 2013, retrieved from <http://business.time.com/2013/04/16/is-retail-therapy-for-real-5-ways-shopping-is-actually-good-for-you/>.

National Association of Professional Organizers, http://www.napo.net/our_profession/certified.aspx.

Self-Storage Association, <http://www.selfstorage.org/ssa/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutSSA/FactSheet/>.