

Nathan Brown
"Soul Food"
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West Side Christian Church

John 6:24-35

On Friday morning, as Marion and I were getting ready to head toward the General Assembly for the day, unlike most married couples, we had a brief disagreement over what I should wear to the convention. I wanted to go for ease and convenience—some khaki slacks and a green golf polo. Marion, however, had encouraged me to bring a nice white button down and my blue sport coat. In her words, "I want you to look like a true southern gentleman."

The only problem was that we were running behind schedule. Because my white shirt had been packed for three days, it obviously needed to be ironed. I said to her, "You know, I think I should just wear my polo. If I end up taking the time to iron my white shirt we are going to be late." She replied, "You know I will iron that shirt for you while you finish getting Harrison ready and then we can still get out of the house on time." Knowing that I absolutely loathe ironing, she added to her reply, "You can tell me you don't want to wear the shirt, let's just be honest about the reason."

I think that morning I belonged to the crowd that is following Jesus in our scripture reading today. If you remember, these folks following Jesus to Capernaum have just had their bellies filled by the feeding of the five thousand. It is the day after that miraculous event and they have followed Jesus over to the other side of the lake because they think that he is their next meal ticket. Jesus knows this saying to them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. "

In other words, Jesus is telling these crowds that they are following him for the wrong reasons. Just as Marion knows me too well to know the reasons for which I am making a particular choice, Jesus knows his followers through and through, and understands their motivation for following him at this point in the story. They are following him because they think he will continue to meet their physical need.

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 and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Hence, missionaries called them "rice Christians."

That name also calls to mind those who flocked to the churches of East Germany and Romania just before the liberation of Eastern Europe—when the church was manifesting courage, and pastors were speaking out against Communist regimes. The people came to cheer the church on, and to join the congregation in its opposition to the tyrannical state.

But after liberation from the heel of the Soviet boot and local dictators, the crowds dispersed and the churches began to look as straggling and abandoned as they had before the strings of political liberty took hold.¹

I remember reading an article, just after 9/11, that reported on the spike in church attendance here in America, following those horrible days in mid-September 2001. People ventured that everything had changed. Republicans and Democrats sang together hymns on the Capitol steps. Christians and Jews responded to acts of hatred toward Muslims by forming protective rings around mosques. Congregations distributed aid to those most directly affected by the destruction of the twin towers without regard to differences between CEO's and janitors.

But, a few months later, after the dust had settled and our wars of revenge in Afghanistan and Iraq took hold, church attendance went back to the way it was and people's lives returned to the status quo.

The crowds that follow Jesus to Capernaum in our reading this morning are like those who see the church and participation in it as instrumental, as something they can choose for themselves to use for their own needs or to pursue their own interests. Christians like the "rice Christians" of the nineteenth century, the expedient Christians of old eastern Europe, or even the Christians who flocked to churches following 9/11 are not a new problem, but are as old as the gospel itself.

I find myself in this crowd of people more often than I care to admit--- following Jesus because I ate my fill of the loaves instead of seeing the signs. What about you? What are your motivations for coming to church on Sunday morning? Why do you participate in the life of this congregation? Have you asked yourself recently, "Why do I follow Jesus Christ?"

Sometimes, I worry we are in the crowd following Jesus for all the wrong reasons: we come to church for the "right" kind of worship or the "right" kind of music in worship, for political engagement on behalf of the poor and downtrodden, for the sake of a Christian America, for a strong youth and family ministry, for the opportunity to practice mission in a downtrodden location, or to go on mission trips to some place new.²

¹ Sparks, O. Benjamin. "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Proper 13 (Sunday between July 31 and August 6 Inclusive). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Pg. 308.

² Ibid, 310.

This week I read about a church within an inner city, which had declined drastically over a couple of decades. They decided to get back in touch with their community and launch a program of evangelism. They studied denominational manuals on evangelism and church growth, they met and planned.

They devised a questionnaire and divided up into teams that would go out into the community surrounding their church and administer the questionnaire to the people they met. Basically, the questionnaire had a number of questions that all had the church in focus, "What would you like our church to do for you?"

Some of the people interviewed said that they needed daycare for their children. Others said that they would like for a safe place for their children after school. When the results were tallied, they had a few good suggestions for services that the church could render to the community.

Then a layperson asked, "Is this really what we're supposed to be doing?" Is all we can do as a church to say to our community, "Where are you itching, we exist to scratch it?"

Her words really hit home. The church is about God. The church exists to sign, to signal, to witness and proclaim to the world that something has happened in Jesus Christ. Maybe people really don't know what their needs are *until* they meet Jesus. He rearranges our needs. Maybe the church has more important business than meeting people's legitimate felt desires.³

This Sunday is the second of five consecutive Sundays, in our lectionary readings, that follow the sixth chapter of John, and the way that Jesus uses bread to teach his followers what it means to live faithfully. Last Sunday he used bread, in the feeding of the five thousand, to initiate this conversation.

In this Sunday's reading, he is trying to distinguish between that which only nourishes our physical bodies and meets our desires and needs and the bread that feeds our spirits, the bread that ultimately sustains us for eternity. Jesus calls this kind of bread: "the bread of life."

We sometimes get confused about these two very different kinds of bread because the church gets caught up in sharing the bread of the world and forgets to offer the bread of life. We work so hard to figure out what people want---what might meet the community's wants and desires, how can we market our ministry better, what can we do to fill people's bellies, that sometimes we forget to offer the most important aspect of being church---a life-sustaining relationship with Jesus Christ.

³ Willimon, William. "Relating the Text" *Pulpit Resource*. August 6, 2006 – It's Not About Me or You. 9th Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 13).

In our reading this morning, Jesus reminds us that what we have to offer—in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ is not bread from the world, but first and foremost is “soul food.”

Jesus says to those following him, “Do not look for food that perishes, but look for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” This soul food or bread of life, does not perish, but lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world. It is soul food that we need, and soul food in which we will rejoice, long after our bellies are full of rice, our lives know justice in a free society, and tragedy has subsided.

For the last month, I have been on a pretty steady diet myself. My blood pressure has been too high as a result of not taking very good care of myself. Because of diet and exercise, I have lost about fifteen pounds. Everything was going great until I went to General Assembly this week.

In the midst of spending time with colleagues and friends, in the midst of spending time with my family in Indiana, I was following Jesus this week with a full belly. That’s what we disciples do when we get together...we eat!

However, after leaving Indiana on Saturday and reflecting on the week, I realized that it was not the full belly that enriched and sustained me during my time in Indiana with family and friends. It was the soul food I received from spending time with those I love, worshipping with fellow disciples, doing the greater business of our witness as a denomination, and reconnecting to God through my relationships, that I was fed and nourished to do God’s work in the world.

As we continue to offer Angel Food ministry to our community, as we continue to feed the homeless through Oasis, as we participate in Disciples Women and Disciples Men groups, as we come to worship and engage in bible study, as we continue to offer the ministry of West Side Christian Church, may we be reminded that we are not just offering bread of the world, we are offering bread that does not perish, the bread of life. What we offer is Jesus Christ---soul food for the journey.

Amen.

