

Pastor Joe Polzin
 John 6:22-35
 “The Giver and His Gifts”
 Year B – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
 August 5, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You think Jesus would have been happy that people were coming after him, chasing him down. The people woke up the morning after Jesus had fed them, feeding the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish, and when they discovered he was no longer there, they went looking for him. Even getting into boats themselves and sailing across the Sea of Galilee to find him. That took some effort. And that should have been a good thing, right?

Well, apparently not. Because when they find Jesus, they try to figure out how and when he got there. There was only one boat the day before, and they knew Jesus had sent the disciples away in it, but he didn't go with them. Of course, *we* know he walked on water, as we heard last week. But upon hearing the question, Jesus doesn't seem particularly happy to see them.

He doesn't greet them, commend them for coming after him, or speak some other warm and happy words to them. He says (and this is my paraphrase now): *You came just because you want more free food. Stop. There's something more important going on here. That food I gave yesterday was a sign. I'm not here just to fill your stomachs, but to fill your souls. I'm not here just to provide bread for this life, but for eternal life. For I'm not just a Rabbi, a Teacher, as you call me, but I am the Son of Man. You came all the way across this Sea for food that perishes. Would you have come so far and worked so hard if I hadn't fed you? If I had only given you my Word? You wouldn't have, would you? And yet that's the more important thing. You should be working harder for that food than for food that perishes; food that just leaves you hungry the next day. Stop then. And repent.*

What Jesus says is that chasing after him isn't necessarily a good thing if you're chasing him for the wrong reasons. Yes, Jesus gives good things for this world and life, and he's happy to do it. After all, when the disciples were handing out the bread and fish, don't you think he was happy to do so? Of course! He is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep. He loves giving gifts.

But if *we* love the gifts more than the Giver, if *we* chase after the gifts more than the Giver, if *our* focus is the gifts more than the Giver, then the gifts aren't good in and of themselves. In fact, we've turned them into something quite harmful for ourselves. We've made them idols, false gods, the gifts we live for and chase after, instead of the one who gives them.

So think about it: for what are you willing to “cross the sea”? If you think about it a while, you may not like the answers you come up with. Roads that seem too long, or in the winter, too treacherous to drive to church are willingly braved to go to all sorts of other events. Checks that look so large going into the offering are written so easily for other things in our lives. Time that seems in such short supply for Scripture and prayer because we're “just too busy,” is lavished upon television, or smart phones, or fishing, or sports, or other recreation.

Which isn't to say we can't have or do those other things - we can, and there's nothing wrong with them. Our Lord gives us things in this world as gifts to have and to enjoy. But when we neglect the Giver, and only take the gifts, we lose all sense of God's goodness, and we lose a sense of proper priorities.

And it's sobering, isn't it? When we're willing to "cross the sea" for the gifts but not for the Giver of those gifts? I'm sure you can consider how this is true in your life, and so can I. Our sinful nature will always go after and cling to the things of this world, the things that we can have and hold and enjoy and feel secure with—the gifts, rather than the Giver. And so we, too, need to hear those words from Jesus in Capernaum that day. We, too, need to repent.

Now at this point in the Gospel, the people seem willing to do so; to repent. Or at least they didn't turn around and go back after Jesus rebukes them, after he indicates he isn't going to produce more bread. Instead, they stay and speak more with him. They want to learn more. *So okay, Jesus. You told us not to "work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life." How do we do that? "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"*

Perhaps the answer they expected, and that we might expect here, is the Ten Commandments. The Law that Moses gave. What must we do to please God? Good works, right? Love God, and love your neighbor. Pray, read your Bible, go to church, honor your father and mother, don't murder, lead sexually pure and decent lives, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet what your neighbor has, don't enrich yourself at his expense. That would seem to make sense here.

But no, Jesus doesn't say that. Because doing those things cannot earn you eternal life. Doing those things are good in life, and they are the way Christians should live, but they cannot atone for the times you've already fallen short of those commandments, and for all the times you will continue to fall short of those commandments. For the sins you've already done, for all the sins you will do, which have already produced the death you're going to die. When it comes to living eternally, good works are *not* the answer.

Rather, in a clear proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom [the Father] has sent." Or in other words, the work that will save you is not your work at all. It's the work of the God alone. Put your faith not in yourselves and what you can do, but in the one who was sent to you. The one who was sent, not across a Sea, but across time and space, from heaven to earth, to provide for you eternal life. The one who was sent to fulfill the Law on your behalf. The one who was sent to forgive your sins and conquer death. Place all your trust on Him, everything you have, place on him. If you're going to "cross the sea," cross it to receive him. Not for food that perishes. Not for food that's here today and gone tomorrow. But for the food that endures to eternal life.

Okay, they say. Show us a sign then. You can almost imagine the scene. We don't know how many people were there, but it was a crowd and as crowds do, they were probably all shouting different things at different times. And so the guy over here shouts: "Show us a sign!" And then another guy yells: "Yeah, what work do you perform?" And then from somewhere further back: "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

What they were saying to Jesus was that his bread was alright, but he just gave them earthly bread for an afternoon. That's why they were back for more. If Jesus was going to talk about *greater* bread, bread even greater than what Moses gave, he had to give them a *greater* sign.

But Jesus had already given them a sign. And Jesus had to remind them, it wasn't Moses who rained down bread from heaven (as we heard in the Old Testament reading from Exodus), it was God. And the same God who had done that for them is the same God who had just fed the 5,000. A little different procedure, but the same gift, and the same Giver, the same God. But they were blind. They couldn't see who was giving the gift in either case, or how great the gift was, or

what it meant. They wanted to see something more spectacular in order to believe what Jesus was saying.

And again, that's a trap so easy for us to fall into, as well. The thinking that God needs to continually show us bigger and better signs in order to prove His own validity. We think, the more spectacular, the more miraculous, the more true it must be.

But when we think like that, we miss all that God has done and is continually doing for us already. God has made us and all creatures. He has given us our body and soul, eyes, ears, and all our members, our reason and all our senses, and still takes care of them. He gives us everything we need to support this body and life. He defends us from danger and guards us from evil. He offers us salvation, and life, and forgiveness through His Son, Jesus Christ. And He has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified us into His Church, so that we may be continually blessed with His gifts of Word and Sacrament, forgiven of our sins, and forgiving of others, that we may strengthen each other as the body of Christ is built up (Eph. 4:12).

And the greatest gift God has given us is Himself. And that's what Jesus finally says. He says, "For the bread of God is *he* who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." The bread Jesus is talking about is not a thing, it's a person. And when the people say, "Sir, give us this bread always," Jesus then reveals he's been talking about himself: "I am the bread of life." I am the one sent from the Father. I am the one who crossed time and space. I am the one sent to give you eternal life. "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

That's not just a statement; *that's a promise*. Enjoy the good things given to you by God in this lifetime, yes. But if you focus solely on the gifts, and not the Giver, you will find there's something missing, that there's a hunger and thirst that all the things of this world are unable to satisfy or quench. Only the Giver can.

And the amazing promise is, the Giver comes to you in order to give Himself as the Gift. To fill you with Himself. The Giver is the Gift. And not simply for an afternoon by the sea, or for forty years in the wilderness, but for an eternity. Jesus gives himself to you forever.

The people demanded a sign so that they could believe what Jesus said. And although they didn't get a sign that they would have preferred, Jesus did eventually provide them with the ultimate sign. The sign, as he calls it, of Jonah. Jesus was swallowed up for three days, not by a fish, but by the grave and death – the death that we deserved for our sins.

And then on the third day, he rose from the grave, spit out by death, which could not hold the perfect and innocent one, to live as the victor over sin, death, and the devil forever. "What sign do you do[, Jesus], that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?" *That's* the sign. That the one who descended into death on your behalf is now ascended into life, and because he has, so will you; so will all who are fed by the Bread of Life.

The Bread of Life, and the Giver of such bread, are one person, Jesus Christ. And he comes for you again today, filling you with his Word and with his forgiveness, filling this bread and wine with his body and blood. So that you may feed on him and have the greater gift. That you feed on him and have not just life for a day, but abundant life for all eternity.

Here is the Bread of Life that gives us such hope. So if you're going to "cross the sea," cross the sea for him. For imperishable bread for an imperishable life. So come, Jesus says, and receive him. Believe in him. Come, and receive life. Come, and never hunger or thirst again. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.