

“The Bread of Life”

Exodus 16:1-12; John 6:24-35

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Most of us are old enough to remember the original Twilight Zone series that ran on television in the late 50's, early 60's hosted by Rod Serling- you can still catch re-runs of the show on cable. What I enjoyed most about them was how each episode served as a kind of sermon or morality play, particularly through their clever plots and surprise endings. My FAVORITE episode concerned an alien from another solar system who had landed in a ship only a few blocks from the United Nations. The space creature was one of an extra-terrestrial race called “kanamits,” and similar crafts were landing at various locations all across the earth. The kanamits were about ten feet tall and possessed a humanoid appearance. This particular one had a small notebook in its hand, and as it spoke, it kept looking down and referring to it. It was eventually led to the Secretary General's room where it was invited to make a televised address to the entire world. With the cameras rolling, it said that it had come from a distant planet which was much more developed than earth, but that it and the other kanamits had come as friends. Their intentions were completely honorable. They desired above all to help the people of earth. They wanted to establish embassies here and eventually set up reciprocal visits between the two planets. The kanamit said that it had come to their attention that earth was plagued by both natural and unnatural catastrophes which could easily be acted upon and prevented. For instance, they would make available to us devices which would add nitrate to the soil thereby ending famine once and for all. They wanted to demonstrate the principles of a force field to render the bombs, missiles, or anything else of enemy nations ineffective. The kanamit only asked that the earthlings TRUST them- that's all. Then the camera observes the notebook which the alien had been referring slip unnoticeably off its lap onto the floor.

Over the next few months, the President and the leaders of the earth discover that true to their word, the kanamits HAVE come in peace and that their superior knowledge and technological ability has already produced tremendous results. Eventually, countries won't even need armies or navies or air forces or organizations like the U.N. any longer. Meanwhile, the military, which had gotten a hold of the kanamit's notebook, was busy trying to translate it, and all they were able to decipher was the book's title- “To Serve Man.” This only INCREASED the trust and assurance that the leaders of the world's great nations were placing in this race of giant space creatures. They could envision a day in their own lifetimes when all the inhabitants of earth would have enough to eat, when there wouldn't be any more wars or disease or famine or needless suffering, when the world would become one vast Garden of Eden stretching from pole to pole- so long, that is, as they TRUSTED the kanamits, this race of aliens who had come down from the heavens.

At the end of the episode, you see hundreds of volunteers lining up to march into one of the many space ships waiting to take them back to the kanamits' own planet. Then, one of the members of the team which had been working tirelessly to translate the notebook, is shown frantically running to the place where the people are boarding the crafts. With trembling lips,

she yells out, “I..I finally deciphered their language. All of it. I read their book....the book *To Serve Man*...it’s...it’s a COOK BOOK!” But by then, it was too late. The last person had already boarded the vessel and the door was closed. The kanamits- they had come with great promises which the earthlings were only too willing to buy into, and now they leave- the holds of their ships full of food provisions to be transported to the other end of the universe. If there is a moral to this story, it may well be that if a promise sounds too good to be true, it IS too good to be true.

Well, our text this morning ALSO involves a great promise. Jesus had just fed the five thousand on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Afterwards, he had gotten into a boat and sailed to the other side of the lake. But the crowds, who had received bread and fish from his hands, now wanted MORE and were determined to find him. Discovering Jesus the next day, he says, “You seek me out not because you saw signs but because I fed you with physical bread, with loaves and fishes. However, the food I REALLY offer you is so much MORE substantial than that- it is SPIRITUAL food and it confers upon the one who eats of it not just life—physical life—but SPIRITUAL life, that is, life that is ETERNAL.” Curious, they want to know how they can get this new bread which he offers and Jesus’ reply is “Believe on the one whom God has sent.” Not able to take Jesus at his word, even in light of the great miracle they had witnessed the day before, they demand to see PROOF that Jesus does IN FACT possess this food that he speaks of- food that leads to eternal life. After all, their fathers ate the manna in the wilderness- could he perform as great or an even GREATER miracle than that! Where Jesus had fed only 5,000, Moses had fed an entire NATION; and where Jesus had provided only one meal, Moses had kept his people fed, day after day for FORTY YEARS; and where Jesus had only supplied bread and fish, the common fare of the day, Moses had kept them supplied with bread that had come down from HEAVEN. They tell him that if he is able to do THAT, THEN they would REALLY believe in him. Jesus’ reply is, “Listen, it was not Moses that gave your fathers the bread from heaven, but my HEAVENLY FATHER- HE gives the TRUE bread from heaven which is none other than myself. For I am the bread of God which has come down from above, the bread that ALONE gives life. Understand this- I am the bread of life. Whosoever comes to me will NEVER hunger, and whosoever believes in me will NEVER thirst.”

Jesus’ response is that Moses did not give the gift- GOD did. Furthermore, God’s gift was not just an event long ago in Israel’s past but food that God gives NOW. And most importantly, the bread that comes down from heaven is not just physical food but SPIRITUAL food that is able to satisfy people’s DEEPEST and most PROFOUND hungers in ways that mere physical food can NEVER satisfy. THIS bread, which is HIMSELF, is freely offered, not just to the children of Israel, but to the ENTIRE WORLD. All they have to do is COME...COME to him and BELIEVE in him and then they would be filled and NEVER hunger again.

I’ve subscribed to *The New Yorker* magazine for years now and one reason I have is because I especially love the social and political satire expressed in their cartoons. Last year, one of their most brilliant cartoonists passed away whose bizarre sense of humor often reminds me of my own- Gahan Wilson. Years ago, I bought a book by him called “Nuts”- a collection of comic strips involving a pudgy child called “The Kid” who sees the world full of wonder and adventure but also as a dark and dangerous place full of confusion, frustration, and defeat. In one particular strip, “the kid” goes to the toy store and excitedly purchases a model kit of the Wolf U-Boat submarine. Coming in a huge, excitingly-illustrated box, his head is awash with dreams. It had

cost him three whole allowances but he knows that it's worth it. As he walks out the door of the toy shop with the kit in hand, he can't wait to get home and begin assembling it. He says to himself, "Oh, it's mine at last! After weeks! Mine, mine, mine! I've got it right here in my hands! I'm gonna BUILD it!"



However, when he gets home, he pours the contents of the kit out onto the table only to discover that it's actually a tiny and disappointing replica only around two inches long, the parts of which barely fit together when assembled. As he comes to realize he's been ripped off, the kid imagines a majestic, actual-size image of the submarine underwater beginning to pull away with the captain from his conning tower issuing a fond farewell- "So long, Kid." The kid's sad and utterly impotent reply is, "So long, Wolf U-Boat."

I think we ALL know from personal experience that disillusionment isn't just limited to children and their childhood. Even religion--ESPECIALLY CHRISTIANITY--offers its fair share of disappointments. I especially think of those well-meaning church members who follow these "prosperity preachers" around. They transform God into a giant genie or ATM machine who dispenses unimaginable blessings whether in the form of health, happiness or assorted riches. Their followers are promised that if they first PROVE their faith by sending that ministry a generous financial offering--often referred to as "seed faith"--God will repair their marriage or remove their need for crutches or eradicate the cancer from their bodies. However, when it DOESN'T happen, they then find themselves blamed for not having had enough faith to BEGIN with! It's called "blame the victim" and it's all so insidious!

As I've read and reread and studied this morning's text, I can't help but wonder if I've been every bit as naïve MYSELF, that I've been just as "suckered" as those honest God-fearing Christians I just mentioned. You see, I wonder if with his OWN promises here, Jesus may have

oversold HIMSELF. After all, that's quite a GUARANTEE he makes- "I am the bread of life that has come down from heaven. Whosoever comes to me will never hunger, and whosoever believes in me will never thirst." Is he like the kanamits--those who have come down from heaven "to serve man"--and if we only TRUST him and COME to him, then all our problems will instantly EVAPORATE? We saw, of course, what happened to those poor believing souls who DID trust the kanamits- not only was the aliens' promise a sham, they ended up on their dinner plate.

Now why would I say this? Why would I even suggest that we might want to be even a LITTLE bit suspicious of Jesus' word of promise? Well, to be honest, I've been a sincere follower of Jesus and his message for almost five decades now- coming to him on a regular basis and casting my cares upon him and STILL, it never gets any easier! You see, if by coming to him and believing in him, we are promised that we will never hunger or thirst again- then why am I still always so HUNGRY? Why am I still so hungry for LOVE and hungry for RIGHTEOUSNESS and hungry for PEACE and hungry for JUSTICE in this world? And why do I still THIRST- thirst for FAITH and thirst for FORGIVENESS, thirst for HOPE and thirst for DEEP AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS? I thought Jesus said that if we come to him, all our hungering and thirsting would DISAPPEAR- but that doesn't seem to fit MY experience! Instead of the bread of life, Christ is more like a Chinese meal where after eating you feel full but then you find yourself hungry again after an hour or so.

Well when Jesus declares himself to be the "bread of life that has come down from heaven," I don't think he was saying that if you come to him and believe in him--that is, "trust" in him as the kanamits demanded--that all our hungering and thirsting would be over, that we would never again experience such gut-wrenching emotions as loneliness or fear or anger or feeling unloved. In fact, I would doubt the testimony of any Christian who DIDN'T hunger or thirst for more faith and for more hope and for more love and for more righteousness after coming to Christ. Rather, a relationship with Jesus addresses the CENTRAL, if not the ULTIMATE hunger and thirst in each of our lives- that being the need to know that we are loved with an everlasting love and that we will never be abandoned or rejected by this one who loves us for all eternity. That is the DEEPEST, WIDEST, and MOST ENDURING hunger and it exists in each and every heart. THAT is the void that St. Augustine was referring to when he said that the heart was eternally restless and that it would remain so until it found its home in God. That remains the one hole in our souls which God alone can fill and which enables us to deal with all the OTHER deficits and hunger pangs which continue to afflict us.

Friends, remember that the Bible only makes ONE promise to us--JUST ONE--and that is "I the Lord your God love you with an everlasting love. I shall be to you as a parent and you shall be to me as my child, and nothing--and I do mean NOTHING--will EVER separate you from either my presence or my love!" That promise of his personal presence and enduring love remains the one truth I CAN trust- a WORD OF PROMISE that grows with GREATER INTENSITY and DEEPER CONVICTION with each passing year. But mind you, the promise isn't that Jesus is there to eliminate all your problems and remove all your pains so that everything is made just right again. When the doctor informs us that he just found cancer, the Bible does not state that our Lord will magically heal us of that or ANY disease whenever we ask; or when we've fallen into financial hardship, that he will make envelopes filled with money

to mysteriously appear in our mailboxes as those prosperity preachers like to imply. It is a grave misconception to think that Jesus is some kind of genie who is only there to grant us our wishes or to do our bidding.

Rather, it simply means that if we hold fast to that promise and make it the ONE enduring conviction of our lives- the pledge that our God knows our name and understands our situation FAR BETTER THAN WE DO OURSELVES and, what's MORE, that he pledges to walk beside us, helping to shoulder our burdens so we never have to struggle or walk alone with them, we then discover that the promise of his personal presence is ALL we will ever need and that by it, we are MORE than equipped to contend with whatever may come our way. As God told Paul after the great Apostle had asked him to remove a besetting infirmity from him not once but THREE times, "Paul, my GRACE is sufficient for thee!" It DOESN'T mean we will never have doubts, never have fears, never experience guilt or shame for those terrible things we've done; nor does it mean that we'll never feel bouts of anger or pangs of loneliness or even moments of depression from time to time. But it DOES mean that with the promise of his intimate presence through his Holy Spirit both WITH us and IN us and always FOR us, we thus find ourselves strangely endued with a new-found confidence and courage, an uncommon comfort and strength with the result that we NEVER have to feel overwhelmed, self-defeated, and of course, hungry again. Let us pray...

Eternal and most loving God, forgive us when we doubt your Spirit when it asks for us to draw near, or your Word when it reassures us of your continuing grace, or your Son when he tells us that if we come to him we will never hunger and thirst. Give us the confidence of knowing that regardless of our failures and limitations, we remain safely in your hands, securely in your love, and that nothing will ever change that. In Christ's name we pray, amen.