

**SERMON TITLE:** “Longing for Bread”

**TEXT:** John 6:35-51

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

**BY:** Ryan Dueck

**DATE:** September 4, 2011/12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

---

The task of listening to Scripture is a deeply contextual one.

The church has been preaching from the same passages from (largely) the same Bible for two millennia, but Scripture is always heard at a **particular** moment in history by a **specific** group of people with **specific** questions and challenges, with **specific** responses.

We cannot help but hear Scripture through the lens of what we see around us, the events of our world, and our own experiences.

This is not a bad thing—indeed, I think it is a very good and necessary thing!

We believe that the words of the Bible are **living** and **active**, that they confront us, wherever we are and whatever we experience, and that God works through them to speak to his people, wherever their context.

This is the same for the passage we just heard, where Jesus talks about bread.

So, what is the context into which these words of Jesus are heard this morning? What events and experiences, what expectations and questions, what hopes and fears will affect our listening together?

To help us think about this, I’m going to do something a bit different this morning. There are going to be some images on the screen at various points throughout the rest of this sermon.

These images may distract you from my words, but I’m OK with that. I won’t be offended if I see you looking back and forth from the wall to me.

The images are meant to provide at least a small part of context into which we hear Jesus’ words today.

---

On Monday, a number of people from among us were out at a field south of Coaldale to be a part of Harvest Day for the Coaldale-Lethbridge growing project for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

I had heard about these projects over the last number of years, but Monday was the first opportunity I had to actually go see for myself.

Of course, many of you have been to these harvest days, and will not be surprised to hear that it was an impressive experience.

There were probably 200 people there; there was a BBQ, some speeches, and then the big moment when an arsenal of combines and trucks took to the field.

It was a wonderful picture—people from a variety of beliefs and backgrounds, all coming together to raise money for international relief.

For those who don't have bread.

As I was watching those fourteen combines chew through a quarter section of barley in about two hours (!), my thoughts drifted to the many parts of our world where there is almost unbelievable suffering due to a lack of bread.

Of course, the most obvious example is the ongoing drought/famine in East Africa

We have all no doubt read the stories and seen the images coming out of Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya over the last few months.

There are, of course, no shortage of causes for a tragedy on this scale—drought, economic issues, political corruption, etc, etc.

But whatever the causes, it is truly heartbreaking to see the staggering number of women, children, and men who are suffering and dying, right now, for lack of bread.

The work of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank is hugely significant and inspirational, but as I watched the loaded trucks drive off the field on Monday, I wondered, will this make a difference?

Will there ever be enough bread, for of the need of our world? There are nearly 7 billion of us on this planet right now, and so many need bread. Where will it all come from?

---

Jesus' words in our text this morning come right after another time when people wondered where bread would come from.

We can't think of Jesus' words about being the "bread of life" apart from the events that preceded these words.

Earlier in John 6, we read that Jesus had been followed to the Sea of Galilee by a huge number of people who were impressed by the miracles he had been performing.

The crowd is large, and there is nothing to eat. Jesus asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

Philip responds by saying that even six months wages wouldn’t be enough to feed this many people!

The scene is set for a miracle.

Jesus sits the people down, collects five loaves and two fish from a little boy, offers a prayer to heaven, and dinner for five thousand is served!

There are even twelve baskets of leftovers!

It’s quite a miracle—one that we wish could be reproduced in Somalia or Haiti, no doubt!

But it’s interesting to see what follows this miracle. The people see the miracle and begin so say, “this is the one, this is the guy, the prophet!” And then...

John 6:15 says this:

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

I think this little verse is important as we think about the meaning of the rest of John 6. People’s response to Jesus’ demonstration of spiritual authority and power, is to try to make him king. They want him to fix the problems all around them. They want him to take charge, and alter their physical reality.

Later in John 6, we move to the conversation about bread that we just heard. Jesus is talking about himself as the bread of life, but the disciples can’t seem to get it.

He’s just a carpenter’s son... What’s all this talk about bread from heaven?

I don’t know about you, but I have little difficulty imagining the disciples’ bewilderment in John 6. Despite the fact that they have just witnessed a pretty impressive miracle, their concerns remain fairly terrestrial in nature.

They don’t get what Jesus is talking about.

**YOU** are the *bread of life*...? Okaaay... Well, that’s all very well and good and I’m sure it means something important, but we could really use some of the, you know, *regular* bread here.

There are mouths to feed and things to do, corrupt empires to overthrow, national identity to secure, and, well, you've certainly proved that you could very well be the one we've been hoping for and waiting for, so let's just get you some power and get on with it!

It's understandable—there is desperate need all around... Needs for food, for security, for justice...

The disciples' eyes are fixed upon these physical concerns, and Jesus is trying to get them to consider a different horizon.

But how do you think about spiritual bread when there is so much need around you?

The question is largely the same for us, even if our circumstances are comparatively comfortable: **How do we think about Jesus as the bread of life who will never allow us to go hungry in a world where hunger abounds?**

---

I think that there are, very broadly speaking, two ends of a pendulum that the church has always gravitated toward when it comes to questions such as this one.

Some Christians tend to gravitate toward the "spiritual bread." From this perspective, Jesus was mainly concerned about spiritual truths rather than physical concerns.

These Christians tend to emphasize believing the right things about Jesus in order to ensure that they will be granted access into heaven when they die.

Doesn't Jesus say, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (6:51)?

Doesn't Jesus say, "Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you?"

Doesn't this prove that the spiritual is more important than the physical?

These people would obviously not say that helping out with physical needs is a bad thing, but the main priority is not *this* life, but the *next* one.

**The church, for these people, becomes the place where we get people to believe the right things so that they are prepared to evacuate this earth, with all of its problems, when the time comes.**

Other Christians take the opposite approach. These Christians emphasize the physical at the expense of the spiritual.

Often, they pay little attention to “spiritual bread” and invest enormous amounts of energy into providing physical bread for those who need it.

These people would appeal to the book of James, “What good is it if you tell someone, go be warm and well fed, and do nothing for his physical needs?!” (James 2:14-16)

These Christians often leave aside or consider insignificant the question of what comes after this life, and focus almost exclusively on this life.

**The church becomes little more than a social assistance program with Jesus added on to it like a footnote.**

These two ends of the spectrum have both had many representatives throughout church history.

---

In fact, we are not forced to choose between these two (inadequate) alternatives.

It is not wrong to long for physical bread.

The same Jesus who said, “Do not work for the food that spoils” taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” and declared in Matthew 25 that one of the criteria by which the “sheep” would be separated from the “goats” was whether or not we provided food and water to the “least of these.”

The very fact that Jesus is God *incarnate*—in the “flesh”—demonstrates that God does not think that “spiritual” stuff is more important than “physical” stuff.

It is an undeniable part of the Christian faith that the physical has value to God, and that part of following Jesus is providing for the physical needs of the world.

This is what the images that have been looping throughout the sermon have been designed to help us keep in view.

But.

Perhaps we also need to be reminded, like the disciples did in our text this morning, to lift up our eyes and take in the larger horizon.

Physical bread is important, but it is not everything.

Even the well fed die.

And the life that Jesus is offering people in John 6 incorporates both physical and spiritual life.

This is what Jesus means by “eternal life.”

Eternal life is not just really, really, *really* long life. It is not *just* life that keeps going and going...

Eternal life has to do with quantity, certainly but also quality.

It is a word that describes both this life and the life to come—and not in a way that drives a separation between the two, but in a way in which one is the extension of the other.

Eternal life—life that is infused with the goodness and peace and generosity and openness and faith of Jesus Christ—is available both now and in the age to come.

It is the kind of life that can motivate and strengthen us to give bread to the hungry now, **AND** recognize that our deepest hunger as human beings is not purely physical—to recognize that we were created for eternity.

---

So the question/challenge I want to leave us with is this: What are we longing for?

Do we long for enough?

In our text this morning, we see the disciples exhibiting a longing that is too small.

Their concerns were primarily with the here and now, bread for the masses, political power, liberation. But Jesus was telling them that he wanted to meet their deepest need.

Do we long for enough?

Do we long for bread for all, and participate wherever and however we can to make this a reality (as in the harvest on Monday)? Most of us would, I think, say yes.

Do we long for the bread of life that Jesus offers us? Do we long to be found in him? Do we believe that the bread he offers meets us at the deepest point of our need?

Do we long for the bread of Jesus himself, his body given for the world? Do we long for his kingdom to come, on earth as it is in heaven? Do we trust that this Jesus is the way in which our world with all of its poverty and injustice is made new?

If we do not believe that physical bread is connected to spiritual bread and the life it gives, then we are keeping people alive merely to die.

We are giving them as comfortable a 70-80 years on this planet as we can.

BUT, if we believe that our efforts to provide physical bread for those in need are based upon the Bread of Life himself, and that our efforts at preserving life and flourishing and hope for these 70-80 years is merely a foretaste to the kind of life that Jesus is offering... ?

Well, this is a much bigger hope.

Rather than preserving life in an the context of death and chaos and meaninglessness, we are preserving life for the sake of **more** life, better life, deeper, truer, and longer life—life that cannot be taken away, life that is not constantly under threat due to drought and famine and corrupt politicians and unemployment and broken families and mental illness and depression and violence and confusion.

At the end of John 6, Jesus talks about how he is the bread of life, and that only those who feed on him will have eternal life.

Many cannot accept this teaching—it is “too hard.” There is grumbling—echoing the Israelites grumbling in the desert during another time when there was bread from heaven.

Jesus asks the 12, will you go, too? Peter’s response is familiar:

“To whom else shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”

You alone have the kind of life that we need—eternal life, both now and in the life to come.

Thanks be to God.