

Sermon for Sunday, August 12, 2012 John 6:35,41-51 "You Get What You Need"

You may have heard that it's my birthday. As usual, some members of the family have asked me the most difficult question in the world: "what do you want for your birthday?"

Well, gee, what do I want? To be taller, skinnier, less gray-haired...

What do I want? To hit the PowerBall, to get a new car, to own an apartment in Venice, to have an unlimited supply of dark chocolate....

Rationally, I know none of that is going to happen. I may want those things, but they are unlikely, and in fact they are truly not things that I need.

We have lots of wants, don't we? But "want" is different than "need."

And maybe we spend too much time thinking about our wants and not enough thinking about what we really need.

That is the case in today's Gospel.

Remember where we are in the Gospel of John. Jesus has miraculously fed five thousand people with just a couple of loaves of bread and two fishes. Then he has crossed the Sea of Galilee, and they have followed him. He has accused them of following him simply to get more of the magic bread, when they have missed the point. The bread they truly need is the sustenance that he can offer if they believe in him and in his heavenly father. He is the bread they need.

Today, once again, he says, "I am the bread of life."

And once again, they don't get it. He is promising them eternal life, eternal sustenance, and they don't buy it.

Let's imagine we are these local folks, people who have lived under the thumb of the Roman Empire for several generations. Life is hard. We have been taxed until we have nothing left. We know we are God's chosen people, but it sure doesn't feel special. We are the bottom rung of the political ladder. We know we've been promised someone sent from God to save us.

And we hear about Jesus and what he can do (Miracles! Healings! Great preaching!) and we wonder if he is the promised one who is going to make our lives different. Someone who can lead us in conquering the Roman overlords. So we go to hear him preach and teach, and in the midst of his powerful preaching and healing, he feeds us with the most marvelous bread and fish, even though there was hardly any bread and fish to be had. A miracle, to be sure. He must be the promised one!

But then he slips away, across the water, and we follow him, but he seems annoyed with us. "You're just here for the meal, but you're ignoring what I have to offer that will really keep you going."

And then we get aggravated. Who does he think he is? Isn't he just that guy who was the son of the carpenter, that Joseph? What makes him think he is so special?

We don't need any arrogant kid from the neighborhood, we want someone who will be our king, a powerful conqueror who will take the nation of Israel and make it the most feared and mighty nation on earth. No more Roman taxes. No more being treated as second class citizens. No more Roman soldiers being garrisoned in our towns and taking all the good food, so that we have barely enough bread to feed the children.

No, Jesus cannot be the promised one, despite that little trick with the bread and the fishes. He's just a neighbor's kid, not a conqueror. Bread of heaven? We think not. He is not what we want.

But as the old Rolling Stones song says, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need."

Those people who dismissed Jesus as a magic trickster, a riddle-maker whom they could not understand were so focused on what they wanted – a conquering king – that they missed that he was in fact what they really needed.

They wanted a king, but what they needed was someone who would repair their broken relationship with their God, who would feed them and sustain them and give them eternal life. Not just bread and circuses to distract them, as their Roman overlords did, but real and eternal sustenance.

And eternal life doesn't look like earthly political or military victory. It means that we continue to live in an imperfect world, where we don't always get the things we want. Yes, it is a beautiful world that our Creator has given us, but it is not a perfect world. That perfection, that sense of complete satisfaction, is a mark of eternal life, not of what we experience in the here and now. It is the bread that is more than what we make sandwiches with – it is the sustenance that lasts more than a meal, more than a lifetime.

That is the difficult, confusing lesson that Jesus is trying to teach here. That is why, in John's version of the story, Jesus keeps saying over and over again "I am the bread of life." Because with this humble metaphor, he is trying to get the people who are stuck in a sea of wants to look at what they really need. Not a meal. Not a conquering king. No, what they need is what really endures forever. And they can get it simply by believing that they are the beloved of the one who created them. And the one who created them will make sure that they always get what they truly need.

What do you want? What do you need?

For my birthday, I might have listed all the wants I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. The chocolate, the money, the weight loss...all silly, meaningless wants.

But what do I really need? Just like the miracle of loaves and fishes, I have gotten what I really need: my family around me, celebrating our love for each other, my work in this place that means so much to me, my creator who names me beloved and gives me what I truly need. That is what endures. That is my bread of life. Not wants hoped for, wants that do not truly satisfy, but the needs that matter and last.

Thanks be to God who gives us the bread of life, the sustenance that never fails, the promise of eternal life. Thanks be to God who doesn't always give us what we want, but most certainly gives us what we need. Amen.