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# “Soul Food”

A SERMON on John 6:24-35 for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B  
Preached 1 August 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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Sometime about a week ago or so, I happened to be scrolling through Facebook and, as so often happens, an advertisement appeared in the midst of what I was scrolling through that seemed to hit a little too close to home. Now, those of you who happen to use Facebook—and I’ll admit that I have somewhat of a ‘love-hate’ relationship with it myself—you know that sometimes the ads can seem just a little too related to something you’ve been doing or talking about recently. Those algorithms can seem a little eerie at times, as they draw upon everything you’ve been searching for and watching and writing on your computer, right?

The ad that I happened to see the other day cut a little too close, though, in another way. It was an ad for a line of craft greeting cards and stationary and art prints that goes by the name “I’ll Know It When I See It.” The Vancouver-based designer duo behind the line refer to their materials as “sweet + slightly snarky paper goods™”. Now, I do appreciate supporting local artists and small businesses, and have been to at least a couple of the shops in and around Vancouver where you can find their wares, so I can understand how such an ad could end up targeted at me. But how is that the ad pushed out to me just happened to feature *this particular* “sweet and slightly snarky” greeting card? In bold contemporary text set on a colourful modern design, the one I was shown declares: “MARRIAGE: Asking Each Other What You Want for Dinner [...] Until You Die.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether you might choose to give this to your beloved spouse for a bit of a laugh, or to a couple of newlyweds to keep them from taking it all a bit too seriously, what I knew was that it was probably *not* the card to run out and grab for Adam that night. You see, only a few hours earlier that very same day, the two of us had been caught in a little cranky spat with one another over—you guessed it—figuring out what to do for dinner. Sometimes, you see, what you *really* want for dinner simply is to not have to figure out what’s for dinner. Sometimes you’re just hungry, and you really just don’t know what for.

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Sometimes you’re hungry, and you don’t know what for. With our gospel reading from John this morning, we pick back up with some crowds that we first met last Sunday. If you were with us last Sunday, you’ll perhaps remember that we witnessed that great scene, recounted for us in all four gospels we find in Christian scripture, of Jesus feeding the multitudes—the “feeding of the 5,000,” as it is often called. The story of that day began with mention of a large crowd that “kept following [Jesus], because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” And now, with what we’ve heard this morning, we’ve stepped forward a day in the story, Jesus and his close disciples have stepped away to the other side of the lake, and that large crowd...? Well, they’ve made way after them, stepping into some boats to go on chasing after Jesus and the disciples.

And I think it’s fair to say that this crowd, they are hungry and they don’t know what for. Or at least it sounds like Jesus thinks that about them, that they don’t know what they’re hungry for. Or perhaps more accurately, Jesus seems to say that what they *think* they are hungry for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://shop.illknowitwheniseeit.com/products/asking-about-dinner-love-greeting-card>

maybe isn't the thing for which they should *truly* be hungering. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." He's challenging them about why it is that they're seeking him out. Sure, having your stomach full amongst a people for whom poverty was far more the norm than plenty, this is no small thing! And the sheer magnitude and perhaps even miraculousness of what happened with those five loaves and two fishes, it was and is astonishing.

But there's more at hand here than mere miracles. This whole scene, it gets to the crux of how the Gospel of John understands Jesus. Jesus, at least for John, is the one by which we know that God is with us. In this gospel, Jesus never performs *miracles*, he shows people *signs*. The signs he performs are given so that people might believe in him, and moreover, so that people might believe in the deeper truth to which the signs point: that the presence of God is in this place, that the presence of God is with us. The sign of the abundant feast doesn't merely mean you have bread in your hand; it means you have God *at hand*.

As Jesus talks with this crowd that has followed him and the other disciples over to the other side of the lake, Jesus not only reframes his own actions and the signs that he performs... He reframes for them God's activity among the people since the very beginning. Why did God send the Israelites manna in the wilderness? Because they were hungry, sure. But also *more* than that: so that as they wandered through the wilderness for forty years, they might know that God was with them... that God's presence had not abandoned them... that God would fulfil the great promise to them... that the Lord would be their God and that they would be God's people.

And, of course, the story didn't end there, when the people of old arrived in the Promised Land. When the people eventually went astray, God sent the prophets to them to call them back, that they might know once again that God was still with them, and that God keeps the great promise. When all seemed lost and the people were oppressed by empire, God would send the true Light of the World into the world, to illuminate the shadows and be a beacon to the people, that they might know once again that God was with them, that God's own presence walked among them, that the ancient promise was being fulfilled in their presence.

And there's even more, my friends. You see, Jesus doesn't only reframe his own signs. He doesn't even just reframe the history of God's activity among us. Jesus reframes the work that *we* do as disciples, the work that we do as the church. And you know, we do a lot of work as the church—feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, caring for the sick and the homebound, advocating for the poor and the downtrodden. But *why* do we do those things? Because people are hungry, or cold, or lonely and isolated, or oppressed? Yes: yes to all those things...

*And...* we do it for an even deeper reason, an arguably even more important reason: We do what we do as disciples and as church together so that people might know that God's presence is among them, that God is with them, that God has not forgotten God's promise. Why does Jesus commission the disciples, commission us, to go out into the world and labour? So that our work might be a sign to the world that God is present, that God is with us, that we are not alone.

It's the measure by which we evaluate everything that we do as Christians, or at least the measure by which we *should* be evaluating: does it reveal God's presence in and to the world? As we gather for worship, as we take part in the sacraments, does it reveal God's presence? As we engage in mission and ministry efforts, does it reveal God's presence? As we share in coffee and conversation after service, does it reveal God's presence? As we welcome stranger and friend alike into our community, does it reveal God's presence? As we advocate for justice and for change in our society, do our words and our deeds reveal God's presence?

A man known to his readers simply by his first initial, 'S', writes: "As a child I frequently watched my mother prepare dinner. I would stand on tiptoe at her side, eyes at the counters edge, and watch her work at the cutting board. It wasn't long before she invited me to help. I started with simple tasks like fetching the ingredients from the fridge and cupboard. Under her direction I learned to read a measuring cup. She taught me the fundamentals of cooking in the oven, the slow cooker, and the skillet. I remember stirring everything with wooden spoons.

"The food ready, we'd sit down to eat at a perfectly set table with plates on top of place mats, glasses filled with water and ice, and knives, forks, and spoons laid over napkins.

"When I finally had a family of my own, I followed my mother's example. I found that I enjoyed cooking for others. There's something about watching people take their first bite of a dish I've prepared—the way their eyes shut and they sigh and smile."

"These days I cook mostly for myself," our friend 'S' goes on to say, "because I'm in prison. I have to measure everything by eye. My ingredients are pulled from a locker and cooked in a microwave. No glasses, no silverware. If I invite guests, they show up with their own plastic bowl, 'spork,' and cup. The space quickly grows crowded: a few men on the bed, one on the locker, another on the toilet.

"In a room smaller than most bathrooms, five men sit elbow to elbow, mouths full and heads nodding in approval. When I first came to prison, I felt that the tradition of sharing a meal had disappeared from my life. But I've found it again."<sup>2</sup>

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Sometimes you're hungry, and you don't know what for. For our friend 'S', the feast that he prepares in that "room smaller than most bathrooms" feeds a hunger that goes far beyond an empty stomach; it feeds with far more than what he's pulled from his locker. And it is just such a sign that is offered here, my friends—here at this table, here among this community that is called by Christ's name, here within this world in which we are not alone.

Taste and see that the Lord is good, indeed. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>2</sup> S. Mullikin, in "Readers Write: What Really Matters", *The Sun*, issue 508 (April 2018), 35.