

As we journey through these 5 Bread of Life Sundays this year, I am particularly interested in where we as the Church are seeking to be fed, and in how God is feeding us. Our congregation has just come out of a period of fasting from corporate worship, as well as from many of the other normal habits of non-pandemic life. We are hungry to get back to “normal.” Now that we are once again able to begin gathering in person, I know there are those among us who are feeling truly fed for the first time in a long time.

I’m one of those people. I’ve missed this assembly, and I’ve missed doing ministry in the physical presence of the people for whom I’m doing it. I’ve missed being able to connect with you all in the little ways that we haven’t been able to for the last 16 months. I’ve only recently begun to realize that it was harder on me than I ever realized.

After such a long period of hunger, this taste makes us hungry for more. We are already beginning to look forward to regaining all those things we’ve given up: we want to see a full Sunday School again, to restart dormant programs, to get back into the full swing of things that we had before the pandemic. Maybe we realize that this is going to take time, but we are still excited to go back.

As someone who’s spent his entire life in a Church that has been hungry to go back, I can’t help but notice how familiar this all is. For as long as I can remember, I’ve heard my denomination, my congregation, my friends and neighbors wondering

and asking how we can get back to those days when the Sunday School was full and the building was humming with activity, back when we just kept growing and growing.

I feel today like I could easily be standing among that massive crowd that flooded into the tiny town of Capernaum, looking for Jesus. Yesterday, we ate our fill and had baskets and baskets to spare, all from just 5 barley loaves and two fish. But that was yesterday. What are we to eat today, when church attendance is declining, and the budget is looking meager, and the children are still at home because of COVID?

Jesus has them pegged: “You came because you ate your fill of the loaves,” he says to them, and to us; “not because you saw the signs.” They’re hungry, and they know who can feed them. What they don’t know—and what I wonder if even we don’t really understand—is just what it means to be fed.

In spite of not being able to gather physically, I’ve seen hungry people come looking for connection—not only to Agnus Dei, but to many congregations—and be fed. Some of those folks were engaged before, but others were not. Even members of this community who seldom participated in worship or programs before COVID and new people who have never set foot in this building have told me how important the ministry of this congregation has been to them during this pandemic, and how much it means to them to be a part of that ministry. During this pandemic, we found

our loaves miraculously multiplied in a time of what should have been famine. We've eaten our fill and found baskets and baskets of leftovers.

But in the story today, Jesus reminds us that, as important as the loaves are, they are not the food Jesus has come to give. Their hunger prompted the crowds to get in boats and go sailing around looking for Jesus, but he tells them that the miracle they witnessed at the feeding was simply a sign pointing the real meal: the True Bread from heaven.

The Church has always been in the business of feeding people, both physically and metaphorically. We feed people with worship, with education, with programs and social events, and even with literal food, not the least of which is the bread and wine of the Sacrament. Those things have filled our bellies and sustained us in our lives, and because they are important to us, we want to share them with the people around us.

But the world around us has shifted. People can get their fill of those things in lots of other places. We can experience transcendent music at concerts, community service through philanthropic clubs, community at sporting events and coffee shops, spirituality in yoga studios and SoulCycle classes, and even sacraments can now be dispensed online or out of literal vending machines. One by one, all those things that we have thought were at the heart of the Church's ministry turned out to be just loaves; and unlike the people in St. John's story, we live in a world where

loaves abound. And so, we are left with a question: more does the Church have to offer people?

After all these centuries, and in spite of all this change, this story still holds the answer to that question. The True Bread from heaven, given for the life of the world, is still Jesus. The pandemic has, in my experience, only made this more clear. In fact, the reason so many people have turned away from the Church is not that they aren't looking for Jesus, but because they don't see him in the Church.

We've gotten very good at offering people loaves—worship, programs, events, and the like—but it seems that we have been less successful at feeding the real hunger people have. I wonder if we have forgotten that all those programs and traditions, important as they are, are not the reason we are here. Simply working to convince people that our loaves are tastier or healthier than the loaves they can get elsewhere is not what we are called to do.

In the story, it was their hunger that brought the crowds to Jesus. They had seen the signs he had done for the sick, so they gathered on the grass to be fed. After they had eaten their fill of the loaves, they followed him to Capernaum. I wonder what would happen if, instead of telling people what they *should* be hungry for, the Church instead started listening to what people *are already* hungry for. What hungers you recognize in the world today? Do you see a hunger for justice? How about a hunger for security? Or a hunger for truth?

Now, what do you hunger for? Maybe you hunger for some of those same things, or maybe it's something else. How has your experience with Jesus fed that hunger? That's the only question that matters because it's the only question any of us can answer. D.T. Niles famously said that evangelism is simply one beggar telling another where to find bread. All we are called to do as Christians is to follow that hunger where it leads us and to walk with one another along the way as we search for fulfillment.

The Church began as a way of bringing people together as they took that journey. In fact, the early Church called themselves, simply, "the Way." All the loaves we share together along that Way are simply to remind us of how hungry we all are for the food which endures for eternal life; to *keep* us hungry for the only thing which can ultimately satisfy us so that we keep looking, keep walking, keep rowing. What would the Church look like if we took that hunger seriously? Where might that hunger lead us?

Sometimes it feels to me like the Church is so set on offering people answers and solutions that we forget to honor the questions; we become so fixated on trying to feed one another that we don't stop to listen to our hunger. It's kind of like when you're watching TV and you start snacking because you think you're hungry, when you're actually just bored. That can become dangerous; if we don't pay attention to the hunger and consider where it is leading us, we are liable to try to fill it up with

things like power or success or possessions or any of a million other things that may make us full for today, but leave us empty tomorrow.

Jesus today invites that crowd, still looking for bread, to listen to their hunger, to sit with it and trust it rather than just trying to slake it. He invites them to wake up to it and pay attention to it as a sign of the work God is doing in them. “What must we do to perform the works of God?” they ask. And his response? “Stay hungry. Trust the work God is doing on you: trust *me*.”

What if, instead of trying to sell this congregation as a place with the greatest programs, or doing our best to educate and answer all the questions people have, we committed ourselves to honoring and listening to the hunger of the people we encountered, and walking alongside them to find nourishment? What might that look like for this congregation? What would that require of each of us?