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So how do you make a 6-year-old ride Splash Mountain? The answer is: you don't. I tried encouraging her, I tried bribing her, I even tried lying to her and telling her that it wasn't dark at all, but she saw through me.

I can't help but think about this today as we listen to the conclusion of John's story of the feeding of the 5000. After the people who ate their fill of the loaves come looking for more, Jesus offers them something better, something they're not sure they're prepared to take. In fact, by the end of the story, even the committed followers and students of Jesus are turning away and deserting him. "This teaching is hard!" they complain. "Who can accept it?"

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How do you get a 6-year-old on a roller coaster? Even if you physically pick her up and strap her in, you can't make her have a good time, which defeats the entire purpose of the ride.

This is the conundrum: God created us to have life and have it abundantly. God created us in God's own image so that we might share in God's eternal life by loving as God loves, by participating in God's work of creating and redeeming creation. And yet, we choose not to. We consistently choose to turn away, to pay lip service to God as creator, but to ultimately place our trust in wealth and class and race and political party when we think those things will serve us better. We have much more faith in guns and armies and prisons than we do in God. Here is Jesus, offering us the bread of life, and we turn away instead to find other loaves to fill us, because that's what we're used to.

As we've been reading this story, I've been particularly interested in what it has to say to us as the Church, and as a congregation, in this time. We've only just begun worshiping in person again, and the temptation is strong to want to get "back to normal." If we're being honest with ourselves, though, normal was not serving us so well before the pandemic hit. One of the blessings we've been given is that, now that we are "back," we have to—we get to—reconsider everything we do and whether it's worth doing, or doing in the same way.

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Let me ask you this: why do you want anyone to join this congregation? Why do you think anyone should become a Christian and go to church? Is it because you think they would enjoy it? Because it's important and meaningful to you and you think it will be for them if they just give it a try? That is exactly how I felt on Splash Mountain. I loved that ride! I just KNEW my sister would love it if she'd get over herself and come along. The fact that she didn't made me ANGRY. I felt like she was robbing me of something by not going.

And so, what begins as a genuine desire to share something beautiful and meaningful—as a beggar, to tell another beggar where to find bread—becomes something personal. When we offer this thing that means so much to us, we offer a piece of ourselves, and we worry that if it is rejected, that is a rejection of us. We hate being made to feel vulnerable.

And we are vulnerable. As a congregation, we rely on new people coming in and giving to the budget that sustains us. But then, do we want people to join because we think it will be good for them? Or is it because it will be good for us? All of a sudden, inviting someone to church becomes about supporting our church habit, perpetuating our institution so it will be here for us.

You see how quickly the search for the bread of life becomes a fight over barley loaves. When it seems like something is scarce—like money for the budget, or like esteem and acceptance in the eyes of others—we start looking to the idols of the world to protect us. But didn't this story start with Jesus multiplying even those barley loaves beyond our wildest imaginings?

The people in the story wanted a repeat of the manna miracle. They wanted bread from heaven, enough to keep them alive forever. “You've got the right idea, but you're looking in the wrong place,” Jesus says. “I am the bread of life.” We know this, we've heard it over and over, but even we, Jesus' disciples, miss the forest for the trees, or, in this case, miss the bread of life for all the talk of flesh and blood.

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other things can give him life. “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life,” he says. As confused and disgusted as he may be, he sticks it out and hopes for the best.

And that’s what I’m getting at. If it’s Jesus who has the words of eternal life, why do we get so hung up on institutions and budgets and attendance numbers and programs? Why are we so concerned about making those things continue? Why do we keep trying to force the 6-year-old onto the roller coaster? “It is the spirit that gives life;” Jesus says, “the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.

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