

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13) – Year B – August 2, 2009
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35
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Who remembers Olivia Newton John's hit song, *Let's Get Physical*? It certainly came to my mind this week as I was praying with the readings. In fact, we have a lot of "physical" to address in today's Gospel lesson. This passage is the second part of a three-part revelation concerning Jesus' identity, or should we say, physical presence in the world? Last week we heard the story of how Jesus gives bread. This week we will hear Jesus say, "I am the bread". And as we continue our study of John's Gospel, Jesus will tell us to eat His flesh. Today's reading follows immediately from the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus' sign to the people and His disciples was drastically misunderstood as some kind of miraculous buffet. It would be almost two thousand years later when psychologist Maslow developed his theory of the hierarchy of needs to explain people's behavior in the context of our psychological development. Maslow proposes that until the basic human needs of people are met – like food and shelter – then there is little or no opportunity for moving on to the next stage of development. Even though Jesus had never heard of Maslow, He clearly understood the concept. Jesus feeds the people and when they come looking for him at the next mealtime, He wastes no time in confronting their motivation, challenging the people to see and understand the sign within the miracle.

Jesus is critical of the crowd's materialistic drive for seeking him as he begins His teaching about the real meaning of the bread. The first thing Jesus does is to bring up the tantalizing connection between works and faith: a tension that Paul also addresses, one that Martin Luther would be proud to respond to, and an issue that the epistle of James deals with at length. Jesus tells the crowd not to work for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life. Still missing the point, but perhaps all the more eager to please Jesus in anticipation of another free lunch, the crowd wants to know what they have to do to earn it. "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus sets the crowd straight, once again, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." Slightly less obtuse now, the crowd is beginning to make the connection between signs and God's work, and so they ask Jesus what sign he's going to give them to prove His point. The crowd has already put Jesus' miraculous feeding in the same basket as the giving of manna in the wilderness. Jesus is, however, about to reinterpret that for them. So far, we've gone through this pretty quickly, just describing the action. Now before we look at Jesus' new teaching of the difference between manna and the true bread from heaven, we need to take our own refreshment break and look more deeply at what is going on in this marvelous dramatic exchange.

First, let's see how Jesus resolves the whole works versus faith issue. Being many years removed from the cultural milieu of Jesus' time, we have to realize that the largely Judean crowd heard something very important to them from their scriptural history. In the Jewish tradition, heavenly food may also symbolize the Torah or Law, given to the people by God through Moses. Torah is also known as the works of the Law, so it was entirely reasonable for the crowd to ask for an explanation of what works, meaning what works of the Law, they should perform in order to earn God's favor. What they don't yet comprehend is that there is nothing they or any of us can do to earn God's gracious gifts. In John's gospel the gifts of God all stem from the ultimate gift, which is life. God is life: the giver of life, the sustainer of life, life abundant on earth, and everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Jesus has given the people a sign of life: the gift of food that sustains life is a basic necessity, from which the people are about to learn the spiritual parallel. In John's Gospel, the signs always point beyond the physical to the more profound spiritual meaning found specifically in and through Jesus. Jesus gives bread. Jesus is the bread. Through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus gives life to the whole world. We must not forget that God is a mystery, but we can unfold another layer of meaning here. At least one implication of Jesus' sign is that any who refuse to accept Him as the true bread from heaven, sealed – that is, approved – by God, will starve to death. Our physical death comes naturally as a consequence of our sinful natures, but spiritual death is entirely a consequence of free will. Jesus is clearly talking about a life and death decision here, and as we will see in the next couple of weeks, He

will leave the crowd with the same opportunity to make their own decision at the end of His discourse.

As Paul and later, Luther, rightly understood, and as James is often misunderstood, there are no works of the Law or otherwise that can earn us the right to life now or eternally. As God incarnate, only Jesus, can and does perform the works of God, fulfilling all that is necessary for the life of the world. By God's grace, there is only one thing, one work, required of the crowd, of you, of me, of all people in the ongoing history of the world. That one work is that we believe in him whom God has sent – Jesus. And just to be sure that none of us start to think that even faith is something we are doing for ourselves, Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians (2:8-9), “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Interestingly, Jesus does not detach faith from work, but redefines true work as faith. In other words, faith is not a passive activity or a concept to be understood intellectually. Faith is a spiritual pursuit involving an active, ongoing and developing relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the work of faith is seeking out and assimilating the only food that will satisfy us and sustain us through this life and the next – the true bread of heaven. It is God's desire that we seek our Lord Jesus in all things. The true bread of heaven is found in the blessing of Holy Communion, community worship, and our participation in all pursuits that bring us closer to the Word, like Bible study, prayer, and sharing our spiritual gifts for the glory of God. Eating imperishable food is as simple, and as demanding as a living and active faith, and isn't that food for thought?

The wonder of Scripture is that there is always more; some of which we will focus on together next week. For today, we now return to the scene and listen to what Jesus has to say about Moses and the manna in the wilderness. The crowd has been taught from their scriptural tradition about the Exodus event and Jesus now explicates it for them in spirit and in truth. The crowd says that Moses *gave* the Israelites bread from heaven. Jesus explains that it is God, His Father, who *gives* the true bread from heaven. As we heard last week, the expectation was that the Messiah would feed the people in the same way that Moses did. The point the crowd are missing is that God did indeed sustain the Israelites with manna, but the manna was just like the loaves that Jesus shared – physical, earthly, perishable food that satisfies our material appetites for a short time only, but points to something greater. The manna was food that perished – not the spiritual soul food that is imperishable. The true bread from heaven has come into the world, and even when He stands right in front of the crowd, they do not recognize Him for who He really is.

The perishable nature of the manna in the wilderness is also illuminated in the language – it was given, albeit over a period of years, and then ceased to be given. Jesus speaks of the continuous giving of the true bread from heaven, “my Father ... gives you the true bread from heaven.” And in so doing, directly identifies Himself not only as God's Son, but also as the true bread from heaven. God's gift of eternal life rests in the person of Jesus for all who come to Him in faith. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life”. As we continue to reflect on this passage over the coming week, and hear more of Jesus' self-revelation and His vital role in fulfilling the works of God, let us all consider this question. Within the miraculous gift of our relative affluence, our God-given bounty, do you and I truly know what it means to be hungry?

Amen.