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John 6:24-35
Exodus 16:2-4,9-15
Psalm 78:23-29
Ephesians 4:1-16

August 5, 2018
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Over the years, I have had the unique opportunity to spend time in Taize, a monastic community in France where people from all over the world come to worship, work and fellowship with one another. If you have ever spent time in a monastic community you know they aren't there to make you comfortable. The beds aren't made up with 500 count cotton sheets, the showers aren't lined with lovely tile patterns, and the food isn't prepared by trained gourmet chefs. You sleep in a room lined with bunk beds above someone who snores. In the shower you have to keep pressing a button every 30 seconds to keep the water flowing and the water never comes out hot...just lukewarm on the best of days.

I remember one particular visit to Taize...the weather was rainy and damp. I was cold all of the time. We never had a chair to sit in; instead we sat on the floor or on wooden benches. My back hurt. Our meals were sparse; often a simple bowl of peas and carrots with a side of bread and cheese. There wasn't enough for seconds. I was convinced I needed more food. I was hungry and I remember thinking...you mean all I get is this lousy bowl of peas and carrots?

It might not sound like the kind of place you want to add to your bucket list but I learned something important at Taize. I learned that nourishment comes in many forms. Maybe not in warm, cozy rooms or in abundant dinners. But in unlikely places and in unlikely ways.

At first it was hard to let go of the comforts I had come to count on. It was hard to let go of the full stomach, the good night's rest and the hot shower. But after a few days, the things I missed, gave way to the things I didn't realize I was really missing. Like connecting with people over those bowls of peas and carrots, singing songs in one another's languages in words I didn't understand, taking communion every evening in a candle lit sanctuary with no chairs. And in those unlikely places, I couldn't help but feel close to God.

I have reflected on my time at Taize over the years and here is what I have come to realize... When I was there, I always had what I needed. I had shelter and food. I had water and a place to rest. And above all, I had time with God. I have never felt more nourished. It has made me wonder – why then do we always feel so hungry?

I know you understand what I am talking about...the sense that you are going through life without a purpose, where the things you do seem meaningless, and you keep chasing after unattainable goals of satisfaction and fulfillment. And, so you simply stay hungry. You stay hungry because the satisfaction and fulfillment you have been seeking are aimed at the wrong target. And, it's a sinking feeling to realize you will never hit that target.

In many ways, this is where we find the people in our Gospel reading today. Remember that last week Jesus fed 5,000 hungry souls with simple bread and fish. Simple bread and fish. Like the peas and carrots. Something so basic yet so filling. Something that fed not only their stomachs but more importantly their souls. And this week, it seems they have forgotten the simplicity of the food they are seeking. They want more. In wanting more, they have lost sight of what truly is providing them with nourishment.

Notice what is happening. Remembering the miracle that had just happened, the people started to beg for more. Not only do they want more bread, but more signs, and the ability to work their own miracles. You might say, they have gotten rather greedy and misguided. Hey Jesus, what else do you have for us today?

Jesus is quick to pull them back. He states, "do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures." Not for the things of this world that will never give you true fulfillment but for the everlasting love of God. Jesus is trying to get them to focus on this simple answer to their hunger because he knows they will never be able to get enough if they keep looking to be filled by the things of this world. But they struggle with understanding. It's hard to let go of the things you have come to think will provide you with satisfaction.

And then, Jesus gives the real zinger...he says, all you have to do is believe.

Is it really that easy? When you are the depths of despair, when you feel lost and without direction, when nothing seems good enough and you just can't seem to keep up...Jesus says come to me and you won't be hungry. Believe in me and you won't be thirsty. Jesus is desperately trying to get them to see that it is really that simple. Come and believe.

Yet, we live in a world where trusting the unseen is hard. Where we have bought a false bill of goods that has told us that real fulfillment comes from having a certain job or a house in the right neighborhood, the best clothes or a certain group of friends. We judge our worth on all of these external measures and we stay hungry. Because you know this to be true – someone will always have more than you have. Someone will always be better or stronger or faster or smarter. You name it and someone will always be a step ahead. And if that is how you measure fulfillment, you will never get enough. If that is your bread of life, you will find yourself in a chronic state of malnourishment.

Jesus says there is another kind of bread. There is another answer to your hunger.

I see it almost daily and maybe you do to. Young people who drift trying to find their place in the world...continually saying how they just want to be fulfilled but they can't find what fulfills them. Maybe it is you, who is well into your career and family life suddenly you find yourself feeling you have done nothing of merit and question your worth. Or, friends who are turning to substance abuse to numb their hunger. Anything that will satiate this nagging feeling of not being good enough. From where I stand, our search for food is at epidemic proportions.

Leo Tolstoy wrote about hunger in his short memoir called *A Confession* where he documents his struggle to come to terms with the meaning of his own life. In early nineteenth century Russia, he had built his life as the writer of *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. He had come to have most anything he wanted – privilege, money, fame. But he hit a wall and almost took his own life so deep his despair had become. In spite of his accomplishments, in spite of his fame, he was empty and could find no reason to continue existing. So hungry had his soul become that he began asking himself...what will come of what I am doing today...What will come of my whole life? He writes that he had lost any belief in God and had become resigned to life – a life of continually waiting for something but never finding it.

After a long search for answers, Tolstoy began spending time with common laborers, those individuals not bound by material possessions, because they had none; not bound by excess or notoriety or keeping up with their neighbors. They lived a stripped down existence but it was an existence that brought to the forefront the most essential things in life. And they worshipped God fully and honestly. They grounded their lives and their purpose on eternal promises of love and salvation and forgiveness and mercy. And Tolstoy had an epiphany. He came to realize that true fulfillment, true meaning was found in simple devotion to God. He writes,

“I do not live when I lose belief in the existence of God. I should long ago have killed myself had I not had a dim hope of finding Him. ‘What more do you seek?’ exclaimed a voice within me. ‘This is He. He is that without which one cannot live. To know God and to live is one and the same thing. God is life. Live seeking God, and then you will not live without God.’”

Come and believe. And he did. And everything changed.

So, what would it mean for Jesus to be the bread of life for you? What does it mean for you when Jesus says, I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life for you?

I want you to remember something about life. This word “life” is used 32 times in John. In Greek, it is translated as “life real and genuine, a life active and vigorous, devoted to God, blessed...in this world of those who put their trust in Christ....”

Jesus is saying I am the source of nourishment that takes away your hunger. That provides for you a genuine life, a life that is active and good and devoted to God. A life that is blessed. If you are still seeking fulfillment elsewhere and are missing the target, maybe it’s time to be fed by God.

This is your life Jesus is talking about. This is your fulfillment. This is your bread. Jesus is simply calling you to come and believe. Amen.