

August 1, 2021

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (13 B)

Text: John 6:22-35; Exodus 16:2-15

This morning's Gospel lesson raises some serious questions for your reflection, points to ponder about your lives.

In this back-and-forth between the crowds and Jesus, He directs them – and you – to ask: What is truly important in your life? Or put another way, what is your end goal, the point of everything you do, and what is simply a means to that end? Why do you do what you do?

Toward the beginning of our reading, we hear that there are these crowds of people who are seeking Jesus. That should be a good thing, right? Who or what better to seek after than Jesus?

Yet when the people do finally find Jesus, His words to them are less than approving. He says to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Jesus knows their hearts. He knows that they're there, not because they desire to repent and believe that the Kingdom of God is at hand, nor because they are in awe and thankfulness at the power of God to provide for His people, but because they want food.

Their concerns are grounded in this world, this life. They want full stomachs; forgiveness of sins isn't really on their minds.

If this Jesus can give them that, well, they'll listen to His teaching and whatever else might be required. But at the end of the day, Jesus is just a means to an end, not the end in Himself.

This isn't anything new, either. The people in Jesus' day are following in their ancestors' footsteps.

Almost 1500 years before, the people had grumbled against God and against His servants Moses and Aaron, saying, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

This is an insane statement! The people would rather have been slaves in Egypt – would rather have had God strike them down there – than be free and dwelling in the presence of God, so long as they had full bellies!

They might as well have said, "You know that night when God passed over us because we'd painted the doors with the blood of a lamb? We shouldn't have bothered with the effort and just had a good meal before being killed."

They'd rather have seconds at breakfast and bedtime snacks than have the glory of the Lord in the pillar of cloud and fire right in the middle of their camp!

Seems absolutely absurd, right?

So let me ask you: Why are you here this morning? Do you go to church to be in the presence of God Himself, and to hear His actual words and receive His actual body and blood for the forgiveness

of sins, or do you go to feel good, because it makes you happy, because people will look down on you if you don't?

Now it's not a bad thing to enjoy going to church, and the gifts of God often do bring about earthly joy and peace, but those are just secondary blessings, not the main point.

Perhaps this might be seen if you ask yourself: on those Sunday mornings when you haven't been here or attending church somewhere else, why? Was it necessity or for the good of the others who gather?

For example, if you are vomiting or in excruciating pain, then it is a good thing to refrain from going to church, both for your own sake and for the sake of others as well.

But if not out of necessity or for the sake of others in the church, then why? Was it for the sake of physical relaxation? Having fun with friends or family? Getting ahead on worldly projects?

Again, what is your end goal, your purpose, the point to which all other efforts are directed? And what are the things which you see as simply helpful along the way?

After pointing out that the crowd is just trying to use Him for free food, Jesus tells them, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

The bread and fish were truly miraculous, and satisfied – for the moment. But by this time, the people are already hungry again. That food has perished.

And by implication, Jesus is pointing out that the physical food which they ate does not endure or lead to eternal life.

All the happiness, all the satisfaction, all the success in this world doesn't mean a thing which you're six feet under. Or standing in front of the judgment seat of Christ, for that matter.

Jesus knows that people need food. He created all humanity, including you, and He knows full well what you require in this life. After all, that's why He miraculously made the loaves and fish in the first place.

Or, looking back to the Old Testament lesson, God rained bread from heaven upon His people, six days a week, for forty years – in spite of their grumbling against Him.

Yet that bread would not bring them into eternal life. That same generation, sustained by God's miraculous power in the wilderness, would refuse to trust in Him at the entrance to the Promised Land, and so they'd have to wander in the wilderness until all but two of them had died.

They had made their priority their own physical well-being, rather than the promises of God, and so they had died apart from the blessings which God had desired to give to them.

Since creation, God has desired to give man the greatest blessing possible, eternal life in His presence. Man would have originally had this, but after Adam and Eve fell into sin in the garden, death spread to all mankind.

Now, man would have to get bread by the sweat of his brow, fighting the thorns and thistles, the droughts and diseases, and in the end, he'd still die.

Man needs something else to live eternally, not just earthly bread. And so God Himself came to give that bread, and to be that bread.

Jesus says that He, the Son of Man, will be the one to give this bread that endures to eternal life. It's something that cannot be found anywhere but Jesus. No one else, no other place, can provide this life-sustaining gift. Only Jesus.

And this bread can't be earned or deserved from Jesus. When the people ask what works they must do, Jesus replies that there is only one work, and that is to believe in Him, the One whom God has sent.

Believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God, come down from heaven to earth to save humanity from sin and death through His perfect sacrifice and victory over the grave. Believe that life is found in Him, and only in Him.

Nothing else matters in the end. Everything else is just bread that perishes, and you along with it.

As Jesus quoted to Satan in His temptations, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Here, in the Divine Service, you get to hear that word which grants you everlasting life, which causes you to believe in Jesus, which transforms your hardened hearts and gives you new and loving ones.

And here especially, you get to literally eat that bread of eternal life in Holy Communion.

Notice in the text that Jesus says that He both gives the bread of life, and that He is the bread of life. Jesus is both the host and the meal, telling you through my mouth that this is His body, this is His blood.

Here at the altar, Jesus is giving you life, and not just life as in physical nourishment, which will perish, but eternal life, life that even the devil cannot snuff out.

Here, you get to hear from the God who loves you, who tells you that your sins have been washed away, and then you get to be fed by Him, having Him strengthen your faith and cause you to believe, allowing you to do that work of God of which Jesus spoke.

Here, you get to be with your Lord and Savior in a real, physical way, and have Him strengthen you for whatever life holds.

Getting to hear God's Word and receive His Supper are literally the best things that you can do in this life, because in these things you get the end goal, the purpose and meaning and fulfillment of everything: Jesus!

Everything else, hobbies, relaxation, education, jobs, family and friends, these are all just secondary things. They can be – and very often are – good, of course! They are blessings! They are gifts from God, to be received from Him with thanksgiving, just like the manna given to the Israelites.

But remember, Jesus is the goal. Jesus is the point. Jesus is the most important thing, period. So hear His words. Receive His forgiveness. Taste and see that the Lord is good!

In Jesus' name, amen.