

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Soul Food

August 5, 2012

Pastor Samuel B. Adams

John 6:24-35

This week the issue of hunger in America caused ripples in Washington, DC. Again. Both houses of Congress, each trying to gain traction in a toxic election year environment, passed competing bills extending their list of favored tax cuts at the expense of each other's priorities. In the name of fiscal discipline the House version slashes Tax Credits that specially benefit our nation's poor and hungry, our unemployed and under employed. Morally outraged, the Rev. Jim Wallis from *Sojourners* and the Rev. David Beckman of *Bread for the World* could not remain silent. With the backing of a coalition of 60 Christian leaders concerned about the poor and hungry, they delivered a letter to Capitol Hill urging Congress "to put families and workers before ideological agendas that favor the powerful."

The text of their statement is available in the **Guild Room.**

As Christians we live our lives in a market driven society.

It is **always challenging for us to sort out messages from our culture that go head to head with Jesus' teaching.**

My family fervently believed that well worn saying, **"God helps those who help themselves."**

It is **true that our willingness, and our effort matter.**

And **this saying eases our conflicted minds, diluting God's promise**

to **fit** the **assumptions** of the **market economy**
that **governs** how we live.

But **for Christians**, that saying **fails** as a **spiritual principle**.

It **all too easily morphs** into **self righteous arguments** like these,
“*We did it. You can too! Unless you’re too lazy!*”

We **hear versions** of these
parleyed by **partisan leaders** and their **supporters**
who **advocate cuts** that **disproportionately affect** our **nation’s poor**.
But this **thinking effectively erases** **God’s grace**.
If we get what we deserve, and deserve what we get,
there is **no grace**. And **no need** for it.

The **enduring popularity** of that **old hymn**, *Amazing Grace*,
makes a **very strong argument**
that the **promise of God’s grace** has **not lost** its **power among us**.
Listen to verses one and three.

**Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.**

**Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.**

Even in our **market economy**, where **everything has its price**
or is **exchanged** for something of **comparable value**,
we **know on some level** that we **cannot earn, or even purchase,**
the **most important things**.

Grace names that moment when
we **can *only* receive and be thankful**.

John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*,
was a **seaman** and an **officer** on **ships plying the slave trade**.
Until God caught up with him, and changed him.
After conversion experiences on board ship,

he came – *slowly* – to understand
the **horror his life's work had wrought**
in the lives of his **powerless passengers.**
He **realized that his life would always –**
must always – be different. And it was.
Perhaps that's what he meant when he wrote
“saved a wretch like me!”
He **knew all too well what he had been and what he had done.**
In **mid life he became an Anglican priest.**

Another story highlighting hunger is equally important for us.

John's gospel features a ragtag crowd
who **followed Jesus back across Lake Galilee**
to his **home in Capernaum**
begging him to feed them.
Many of them had been **part of the huge crowd of 5,000**
whom **Jesus had just fed,**
multiplying the simple carry-along lunch of a young boy.
Now they **wanted even more from him.**
What else could – and would – he do for them?

John's account reports his answer to them,
and **carries a vital message to us.**

“Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me,
not because you saw signs,
but because you ate your fill of the loaves.
Do not work for the food that perishes,
but for the food that endures for eternal life,
which the Son of Man will give you.”

Do not work for the food that perishes. That's a big order.

Most of us are not poor,
but **even we spend most of our lives working**
to **keep food on our tables, shelter over our heads,**
and to **save enough to last us through**
who knows how many years of retirement.
Along the way, we try to make our lives

a little more comfortable and interesting.
That requires more resources, and more work.
But Jesus' word to that annoying crowd still echoes,
confronting us, judging us.

"Do not work for the food that perishes."

That noisy remnant,

"leftovers" from the multiplication of the loaves and fishes,
were not prepared for these confrontational words.
John catches and records their argumentative tone.

When did you get here?

*"What sign are you going to give us then,
so that we may see it and believe you?"*

*How do you dare compare yourself with Moses
who fed people manna FROM HEAVEN in the desert?*

Here is the *paradox* at the heart of his challenging words.

God's saving love is God's gracious gift in Jesus.

This gift nourishes our lives as bread sustains our bodies.

But following Jesus is not without cost.

In this lesson Jesus made one crucial non-negotiable demand.

Jesus told them, "This is the work of God,
that you believe in him whom God has sent."

The Greek really says "*believe into.*"

That slight difference in wording is everything.

I believe many things.

But when I believe *into* something – or someone – I join.

When I believed into Christ,

I became part of him, part of his living body, the church.

His relationship to the Father continues to shape me.

I am learning to allow his word to shape my words,
his views to shape mine.

His love for the lost and suffering,

his burden – for the poor, the hopeless, those without a shepherd –
shapes my days.

Believing into Jesus can be a **dangerous business**,
because **he insists on changing us**.
He **recreates us, restores us** to the **image of God**.

For that ragtag crowd,
Jesus sketched the new life that **could be theirs**
when they received his gracious gift.
He **told them about “soul food,”**
bread that would **satisfy their spiritual hunger**. *Listen!*

“I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

When I served as Interim Pastor
of my **“growing up church”** in **Port Townsend, Washington,**
we were **reminded of this promise**
every time we gathered for worship.
Their lovely old solid walnut communion table
is **carved along the front** with his words from that day,
“I am the bread of life.”

On our table here is a loaf of bread, and our communion cups.
Soon we will share them, and be fed.
But there's more.
This table is what *Jesus* called a sign.
It points us beyond here and now.
This simple meal connects us with his followers
across every boundary of time and place.

Even when we gather for worship
and **do not celebrate this sacramental meal,**
God *still* finds ways to give us the soul feast
that feeds our deepest hunger.
Whether we break the bread or not,
when we are willing recipients – we go away from here fed.
The **Living Christ is here among us,**
using every act of our worship to nurture and strengthen us.

**Words of hope and promise from scripture
are imbedded in every line we sing, every prayer we utter.
Through it all God is speaking the living, transforming Word
that makes us new, and sustains us as God's own.**

Listen for the *power* of God's sustaining love in Jesus' words.

**"I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and *whoever* believes in(to) me will never be thirsty."**

Have you ever noticed that our time together here
only begins this process?
All of worship, like the choir's singing, carries a remarkable gift.
It's phrases catch in our memory,
and the promises keep coming back,
feeding us long after we have left this place.
When we are done here, God isn't.
What a wonderful gift to a hungry people.
Even after we have gone back to our daily routines,
this "Bread of Life" continues to work, nourishing us.
That's how it changes us.

**Our eyes are opened by the One who calls himself the living bread.
He *keeps* showing us a world larger than the familiar one
that operates by market rules.
God's Spirit opens us to the world that "*God so loved.*"
But you and I recognize
that there are still times when our vision is fogged.
We come dangerously close to giving in
to our culture's greatest heresy,
selfish preoccupation with ourselves, our own.
Once again we are confronted,
"Do not work for the food that perishes."
We all need God's *Amazing Grace*
every bit as much as did John Newton.
And it is there for us.**

**Through the centuries many have come
to the Lord's table and been fed.
And gone home with eyes newly opened
to people around them who were hungry,
and who would remain hungry unless others helped.
Some of you regularly bring food
to fill the wagons on our Food Sundays.
Perhaps some of you have participated
in the annual offering of letters to Congress,
sponsored by *Bread for the World*.
If you would like to join us this year,
paper, pens, Jim Wallis' letter, envelopes,
and addresses of our representatives
are on a table in the Guild Room for you today.**

**Sisters and brothers, the table is set before us.
We will hear again Jesus' familiar words,**

“This do in remembrance of me!”

**But, this is far more than a memorial celebration.
This is the banquet of the living God.
God is waiting, as always, to feed *our* souls,
to make *us* God's own, to change us, to make us new.
It is God's plan that we leave here,
to live as members of Christ's living body,
with eyes for the poor,
ears for the oppressed,
and hands and feet to work God's purposes.
When we leave here, we may not be the same as when we came.
God's living Spirit is like that.
Thanks be to God! Amen.**