

Exodus 16 & John 6: Seeking Satisfaction

Last week we read John's version of the feeding of the five thousand by Jesus in conjunction with Elisha's using the First Fruits offering of 20 barley loaves brought to him to feed 100 men "according to the word of the Lord." In both of these instances we are told that all ate and were satisfied. They gave a graphic image of the abundance found in God's provision. This morning's readings seem to be more about dissatisfaction. The passage from Exodus gives us one of many descriptions found in the Hebrew Scriptures of these people that Moses is shepherding out of slavery in Egypt to the land promised to Abraham many years before. In many of these accounts these people are vocal in expressing their unhappiness with what is happening. In simple terms—they whine a lot. God has just saved them from the pursuing Egyptians allowing them to cross the sea on dry land and flooding before the Egyptians could follow. They celebrated this deliverance with praise and dancing just a little over a month ago. Since then as they journeyed, they have complained about bitter water which the Lord then made sweet. After that they spent some time camped at an oasis at Elim, so they haven't really been traveling all that long in the wilderness. But they have left the ready supply of water and fruit found there at the oasis and are being led forward into the wilderness. Now it seems they find this prospect to frightening they wish the Lord had killed them before they left Egypt. Never mind it was their cries of distress which the Lord answered that has led to the sending Moses to free them from Egyptian bondage. They are not happy with the results. They complain to Moses that he has led them out into the wilderness only to die from hunger. We know this story well. It is one of many which tells us of the complaining nature of these people. In this passage containing only sixteen verses a complaint is heard 14 times. Whatever they expected from God, it wasn't marching through the wilderness. God's response to their complaint is very familiar to us in this story as well as others. The Lord provides for the needs of the people. Here this appears as food for people in the wilderness. V. 13 & 14: "In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground." We often overlook the quail which came in the evening, but we all remember the fine, flaky substance found on the ground—manna; the bread which came from heaven; the bread which the Lord continued to give them to eat throughout their 40 year journey in the wilderness. In this passage we hear God telling Moses "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people will go out and gather enough for that day." On the sixth day they were to gather enough for two days...no more, no less. God provided just enough for their daily needs. This provision was done in this way so that they would know God provided for them. It was to create trust in God's provision. It seems that in many ways the people never really got the message that it was God's provision for them. They use Moses to vent their complaints, but do not seem to understand that their complaints are actually directed at God. They do not seem to trust that God is with them in that wilderness journey. In the gospels we find God with us in an even more intimate form...instead of appearing in a column of smoke and a pillar of fire God is present among us—in the flesh of Jesus. The gospel of John is the most theologically oriented narration of this amazing gift of God's self to us. In the passage we read this morning the use of the material—

bread— is used to tell us about how the Lord provides more satisfying nourishment for us. This passage follows shortly after Jesus has physically fed the five thousand—and then left the crowd and disciples behind. Both Mark and John tell us that Jesus went up on the mountain alone while the disciples got into a boat and headed out to sea. In both gospels Jesus rejoins the disciples after walking on water. John tells us that this disappearance of Jesus from the area puzzled the crowd. They went searching for him going to Capernaum where he was known to stay. When they locate Jesus in Capernaum they question when he managed to get there. It seems to me that Jesus’ reaction to their seeking him out contains some frustration. In neither Mark nor John are we told what Jesus has been telling the people. Mark tells us that he taught them many things before seeing to their physical needs, but when they go to Capernaum and find him, their question seems to be more about when and how he left them behind than about either his teachings or his true nature. Jesus sees them as not understanding the signs he has shown them. They are only seeking him because he fed them the barley loaves. Jesus is essentially accusing them of opportunism; wanting another meal. Jesus then tells them they should quit trying to be satisfied by things—food—that is perishable. It doesn’t last. Instead, Jesus tells them to seek food which will endure for eternal life. We are often like those people because we come to Christ seeking blessings when we are troubled. We are also like them in our seeking satisfaction from material things. This yearning for satisfaction from the material is encouraged by the world around us with its constant portrayal of the latest and greatest thing on the market. The peoples’ response to Jesus’ statement about seeking nourishment from food that endures seems to be a qualified interest as expressed in the question—“What do we do to get this?” Jesus’ response is simple: Believe in the Son of Man as he called himself, whom God has sent. Now we hear the skepticism—after just having been among 5000 people fed from 5 loaves, these same people ask for a sign like the manna in the wilderness given to their ancestors. Jesus again repeats that the bread of God which they seek is himself. The people then ask to receive the bread from heaven which gives life to the world. Jesus tells them and us “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” This is the call of Jesus for us. We are to seek our satisfaction which lasts from our relationship with him. This is why we have the sacraments. To be provided nourishment that never fails; that is always present and available; that fully satisfies our yearnings. That is quite a promise. Like those who sought Jesus after being fed materially found they were not satisfied for long we find that material things do not really satisfy. That is why when we come to this Table we are promised nothing less than forgiveness, acceptance, wholeness: in a word, life, both now and forever. Communion and Baptism are God’s external and objective words of love and forgiveness in a form which we can receive. They represent God’s physical, visible words for God’s physical, visible people. God offers us love. God offers us God’s own self. For as Martin Luther would tell us the whole of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are summed up both succinctly and eloquently in two words we hear when we approach the Table: for you. This is Christ’s body given for you. This is Christ’s blood shed for you. Jesus is the bread of life which truly satisfies, now and forever, amen.