

John 6:24-35 ²⁴ The following morning, the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, so they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ 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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 6:24-35

08/04/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Enduring Nourishment

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It will not astonish any of you when I say I’m a movie buff. Movies have a way of sticking with us. Is there anyone who doesn’t want to sing “the hills are alive” when Maria pirouettes across the screen with the Alps in the background? Some of you who are old enough will remember sitting in a darkened theater in 1977 when innocuous little blue words appeared on the screen: a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... And then the music blared and you were glued to the screen because nobody had ever seen anything like *Star Wars* before. Or ET and Elliott biking in front of the moon. Top Gun fighter jets buzzing the tower. Dinosaurs brought back from extinction. Great books coming to life before our eyes. Heartless villains. Unlikely heroes. Endearing characters. Magic moments.

Over time, however, most movies get forgotten. They fade from memory as new things are released to theaters or streamed online. Or until a sequel gets released. Two years ago, they released a sequel to a delightful little film I used to watch with my girls when they were little. Still to this day, when I want a fun movie where I can laugh, cry, and just enjoy myself for a while, I turn on a little flick starring Amy Adams and Patrick Dempsey entitled “Enchanted”. It starts off as a cartoon, where a beautiful princess is preparing to marry her one true love, her handsome prince charming—you know how it goes. Of course, there’s an evil stepmother—no fairy tale is complete without her—and she is bound and determined to stop this wedding, lest this upstart princess take her crown.

But she’s rather ingenious, this evil stepmother. She doesn’t offer a poisoned apple or a needle on a spinning wheel. No, her weapon is much more sinister—it’s reality. She drops our little fairy princess down a wishing well, and our heroine princess emerges as a real person in her sparkling, billowing white wedding gown from a manhole in Manhattan’s Times Square. After being nearly run over by a taxi cab, robbed by a bum, and trampled by the mass of humanity in its hurry to get from here to there, she is begrudgingly offered shelter for the night by a divorce lawyer who thinks she’s mentally ill. In New York, animals don’t talk, Prince Charmings are hard to come by, and relationships are complex and messy and therefore difficult. Reality.

In the end, our princess is given a choice. An old hag (you know who she is) offers her a bright, shiny, red apple with this promise: one bite, and all the sadness, all the suffering, all the confusion and chaos, all that's bad and grievous will go away. Poof! No more messy reality. In case you haven't seen it, I won't tell you how it ends, but let me ask this: would you bite?

Some of us might. Some of us who have suffered terrible losses, terrible injustices, terrible illnesses—some of us just might. And it's understandable. Even scripture seems to acknowledge that there's a need deep within us to see things made right. We're told that when Jesus returns, there'll be no more pain and suffering, God will wipe every tear from our eyes, God will spread a rich feast for us on the mountain of the Lord. I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that I'm looking for that day to come with both trepidation and hope together.

But my guess is that many of us probably wouldn't bite. Not because we enjoy suffering, but because we've accepted the fact that a certain amount of it comes with living in a fallen world, and because we realize that pain and joy often coexist within the same relationships, the same events, the same experiences.

But we might suffer what our dear princess does in the sequel. In *Disenchanted*, she forgets. She forgets that hard work bears fruit. She forgets that relationships take time. She forgets who she is. She forgets what matters. And for just a moment, she makes a very foolish wish for her fairytale life, with nearly disastrous consequences.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus has just finished feeding the 5000. We talked about that last week. He and his disciples steal away to the other side of the lake, and the crowd comes clamoring along behind, hungry for more. Hungry for signs and showy stunts. Hungry for bread. Hungry to have needs met easily. Hungry to not have to work hard anymore, not suffer illnesses, starvation, pain, or hardship anymore. This is a crowd that would probably bite. Certainly, it's a crowd that's forgotten who and whose they are. And that, of course, is the problem. They're disenchanted. They're looking for a ration rather than a relationship. They're looking for simplicity rather than significance. They're not interested so much in substantial truth for the soul as they are in mere sustenance for the stomach. Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness—what can you do, Jesus? And they never catch on to reality—that God gave manna to teach trust and dependence, to build relationship between God and God's beloved people. That's the point! Relationship. Forget showmanship, it doesn't sustain. Relationship—that's what God is after.

I am the bread of life, Jesus tells us. Bread. Bread that came down in the wilderness for Moses and the Israelites. When Jesus was driven into the desert, the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread. He refused. He knew it wouldn't sustain. When his disciples begged him, "Master, teach us how to pray," Jesus taught them: 'Give us this day our daily bread.' And when Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples and sought to give them a ritual and a way to remember the epitome of Gospel truth—that Jesus Christ is the gift of God's grace to reconcile us to the Lord—he used bread. I am the bread of life. Take and eat. Eat and Live. Remember.

Remember who God is. Remember who you are. You're here for a purpose. Jesus tells his followers not to work for what perishes, but for what lasts. When Jesus says, "I'm the bread of life", I think he's saying that we can trust him. I think he's saying that he'll give us what lasts, what matters.

I came across an interesting discussion the other day from James Mayfield. He writes about three prominent figures in the modern understanding of psychology: Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Viktor Frankl. According to Mayfield, Sigmund Freud was convinced that humankind is driven and motivated by a hunger for pleasure. He argued sexual pleasure was what drives us, but other pleasures, including decadent foods and enjoyable experiences were also in the mix.

“Alfred Adler did not deny that longing for pleasure is definitely one of the motivations of human behavior; however, he was convinced that our most basic hunger is for power; we want to be in control. This is how we stay off fear.

“But Viktor Frankl, because of his experiences in a Nazi death camp, disagreed. He did not deny our human desire for pleasure and our longing to be in control. But when both of these were totally stripped away in his experience in Auschwitz, he became convinced that the basic human hunger or the deepest drive within us is our deep longing for meaning and purpose. We want life and our lives to matter. [3 ¶s adapted from James L. Mayfield, *For What Are We Hungry?*; in illustrations for John 6, www.Sermons.com.] I think Frankl is right. I am the Bread of Life, says Jesus. Trust me with your life, and I will give it meaning, purpose, shape, direction.

I read an amusing story about a teenager we’ll call Tyler. Tyler was walking on a street one day when he felt himself being followed. All the sudden, he felt something hard thrust against his back, and a gruff voice said: “Give me your wallet.”

“No,” Tyler said.

A little sidenote here: if someone puts a gun to you and says “give me your wallet”, do it. There’s nothing in your wallet worth dying for. But Tyler was 16 and a little cocky, and he said no.

“Give me your wallet, or I’ll shoot,” the voice threatened.

“No,” Tyler said defiantly.

“I said: Give me your wallet, or I’ll kill you,” the voice was snarling now.

“No,” Tyler said once again. He kept walking, and a few steps later, he realized that whoever was following him had disappeared back into the shadows.

Tyler sprinted for home to tell his mom, breathless and a little shook up, but still pretty proud of himself as he told her what had happened. He did not get the reaction he expected.

“What were you thinking?” his mother roared. “Why the hell didn’t you give him your wallet! When someone puts a gun in your back, you give them your wallet!”

“But Mom,” Tyler protested, “My learner’s permit is in my wallet!”

I’m guessing that Tyler’s mom had to go take walk to keep from wringing his neck. But part of me gets it. Tyler was moving forward with his life. That learner’s permit was the next step. He had a purpose, and it was important to him. [adapted from *God’s Little Devotional Book for the Class of 2000* (Tulsa. OK: Honor Books, 2000), p. 297; as adapted from “In Search of Jesus” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] All of us should have some purpose for which we’re willing to risk something. Not a learner’s permit, certainly, but some calling, some good we want to do in the world. Where do you see God at work right now? What is God doing in you? Through you? Around you?

When my mother was in the hospital going through chemo, a friend stopped by one afternoon. He was a jeweler by trade, and he’d brought with him a series of rings, in descending sizes. One by one, he tested them on my mother’s finger until he found the correct size. Then he took her wedding ring and her engagement ring, returned to his shop, and resized her rings so that they’d fit as she got thinner. A day or two later, he brought them back to her at the hospital. That seemed like pretty specialized service for a jeweler, but I learned they’d become friends through mom’s interfaith work with the World Sabbath in Detroit.

I also learned that some years before, this man lost his wife and his two children when a drunk driver plowed into their car one afternoon. That morning, he was a family man. That night, he was alone. I can’t imagine coming home from the hospital to see the clothes and possessions and evidence of three lives in progress just cut off in an instant. He told my mother he made it because of his synagogue. His community of faith carried him through, kept him sane, helped him cope. He knows about manna in the wilderness of grief, day by day, moment by moment, trusting God and community

to see him through. He told my mother he couldn't hate the man responsible for the death of his family. He had to forgive, had to move on, had to see this man as a fellow human being equally in need of God's abiding love and mercy. Not that this was easy. But, he says, not to do so would have been to bind his own soul in darkness and despair. He deals in gold and precious gems, but he knows that the things in life that matter most can't be weighed or priced or shaped. No wonder mom trusted him with our precious family heirlooms. He knew what matters. He had turned his life over to God's care and keeping. He tenaciously continued to trust life, human goodness, and the triumph of love over death and destruction.

I am the Bread of Life, Jesus tells us. I am nourishment, sustenance, strength for your soul. I am what you need. I am your energy. I am your identity. I am your connection. I am the dynamic force living in your relationships. I am.

I am the Bread of Life, Jesus tells us. Take me in. Trust me. Trust me with your life. Trust me with those you love. Trust me when it seems like all hell is breaking loose. Trust me to be faithful.

I am the Bread of Life, Jesus tells us. Bread broken for you. Bread that will feed your soul. Bread that will nourish you through the inward famine of suffering and pain. Bread that will give you what lasts. Enduring Nourishment. But each of us must decide: Will we bite? This bread will not transport us from reality, but it will transform our reality. It will not end suffering, but it will give meaning and purpose. It's not magic. It's as real as it gets. I am the Bread of Life, Jesus says— Remember. Take. Eat. And live! Amen.