

The Work of the Kingdom

Menno Mennonite Church

August 1, 2021

Purpose: To envision the work of God beyond the traditional notions of service

Message: We are invited into the life of Christ not to secure what we require, but to be about the work of participating in what God is doing.

Scripture: John 6:25-35 (I will read); Psalm 23

Synopsis: We are acquainted with the work of doing church. There are schedules to keep, tasks to be handled—on and on we go about it. When we think of the kingdom, we think mostly of the practical outgrowths of the structures that we have made around the kingdom—that big long list of work. Jesus, though calls us to a far more central task—to be about the work of the father, the work of loving God. It is out of this singular focus that all else comes and proceeds, and in which we can rise and move going forward.

As we discern what we do and do not do, we need to take the opportunity to embrace the full work of the Spirit in bringing us together.

John 6:24-35 MESSAGE

So when the crowd realized
he was gone and wasn't coming back,
they piled into the Tiberias boats
and headed for Capernaum,
looking for Jesus.

When they found him back across the sea,
they said, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered,
"You've come looking for me
not because you saw God in my actions
but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free.

"Don't waste your energy striving
for perishable food like that.

Work for the food that sticks with you,
food that nourishes your lasting life,
food the Son of Man provides.
He and what he does
are guaranteed by God the Father to last."

To that they said,
"Well, what do we do then to get in on God's works?"

Jesus said, "Throw your lot in
with the One that God has sent.
That kind of a commitment gets you in on God's works."

\They waffled:

“Why don’t you give us a clue about who you are,
just a hint of what’s going on?
When we see what’s up,
we’ll commit ourselves.

Show us what you can do.

Moses fed our ancestors with bread in the desert.

It says so in the Scriptures: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ”

Jesus responded,

“The real significance of that Scripture
is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven
but that my Father is right now
offering you bread from heaven, the *real* bread.

The Bread of God came down out of heaven
and is giving life to the world.”

They jumped at that: “Master, give us this bread, now and forever!”

Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life.

The person who aligns
with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever.

I have grown to dislike my alarm clock. There are the usual reasons. The fact that it means that a typically short night of sleep is now over (always something to mourn), or finding that I am crowded by one child or another who arrived unannounced in the middle of the night. That is bad enough. What has put me at odds with the thing, looking for the snooze button one more time is the fact of this is when the quite bubble of forgetting the goings on in the world stops as the news is sure to follow. And seldom is it good, sensible or particularly encouraging. To be sure, this is how it has been for time out of mind for as long as anyone can imagine—I know this. But at least the newspaper was polite enough to wait to speak until it was addressed. Now all I need do is let the media start to flow to be taken by the wave of what has been. The radio is bad enough, my phone is worse. Even for having turned most of my “do not notify” settings up to 11 there seems to always be a few headlines waiting to pounce in the morning blur. News of shootings that become disturbingly routine. Natural disasters of every shape and size. The world as it is churning away without end. Sometimes it would be nice to re-engage with the world in a less clutch-popping fashion than just being brought again to the needs of the world, and the seeming impossibility of change. It becomes one more inspiration to find the snooze button and go back to sleep for the foreseeable future—never mind the snooze button. And I am guessing that I am not the only one to feel this way—far from it.

This account this morning is one which we read with an eye toward, I think, being glad that it was not us in the crowd pestering the Messiah. Yet, it is precisely because it is about us—about the human condition—that I thought it a good story to sit with. We wince not because it is embarrassing to see the people so crassly pursue the miracle before them, but because I think we see a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror it holds up. This interchange between Jesus and the people comes directly after Jesus finds a few loaves and a couple of fish and feeds thousands. John ends that story with Jesus pulling back into the mountains, and then sailing across the lake (the disciples sail, Jesus takes the short way across the lake by taking a stroll) because he knows that the people he just fed want to make him king, by force if need be. But even these drastic steps are not enough, and the people catch up to him and do the utterly predictable: “that was great—almost like Moses!” they cry, “Let’s see you do that again.” When we find ourselves a good thing, when we are thankful for receiving even that which we least expect, we are awfully keen to make sure that we keep receiving it. More to the point, when you find someone who can fill your needs, especially basic needs like food and

water, you want to keep them around and put them in charge. It is a great way to seize power; no wonder it was one of the options that the devil set before Jesus by way of temptation. We are far more given to seek out the result of the gifts of grace, the stuff we get then to consider the meaning of the fact that there is provision in the first place. Jesus is reminding the people that it is ultimately not the meal that will satisfy their needs, but rather the nourishment of the spirit which is truly on display for those inclined to see it. It is the bread of the Spirit, says Jesus, that really satisfies. It is the nourishment of the soul and the grace of salvation that must be lead to giving thanks, not just the stuff we have and the means by which we are sustained. Yet they, we, remain so occupied with the needs of the days we can struggle to find adequate ways to even wrap our heads around the notion that there is something beyond our daily bread to consider that there might be someone offering more than the simple provisions of the mortal world. We can struggle to consider the working of God with us when we are so often consumed with the provision of our daily bread. For the record, this is a conversation regularly held in the Miller-Toews household as well as anywhere else.

The concerns of our world and the challenges of our lives seem so impressively large. Navigating life is a challenge. Sometimes adding in a more global comprehension of the needs of the world can make things seem downright impossible. Sometimes it can feel as though Hallelujah is the last thing we are inclined to sing amid a word of troubles. We can be so concerned about the state of things, and the possibility of things ever changing that we can fear that there is even a way forward. Witness the honest wondering that always arises in moments of crisis whether this might be the end of it all. We, like those on the lakeshore come looking for Jesus because we are looking for the work of God—the miracles of provision and purpose where the Shepherd supplies our need as much as we come seeking to lodge our spiritual selves in the timeless one who promises that true soul hunger will never be a problem for those who seek God. Yet even here, Jesus reminds us that here too there is bread, bread of hope, bread of spirit, bread of the living God who is not constrained by the limits of the seemingly impossible change that is so needed in the world, in our lives.

One of the tings that we have been working on with the kids is the practice of giving thanks. By way of an introduction to praying, we ask what they are grateful for in their lives. Many times it is the normal stuff—Mama and Daddy, our dogs; the stuff that you might expect that comes to the fore. But now and again, they have a way of surprising us, remembering

people and places that we have long forgotten, and giving thanks with keen insight. Many of you are often on that list, and we are grateful. As usual, it often comes from the mouth of babes and their fresh outlook on the world that we are given a view of the world as it may be. Their view of the way the world view is less cluttered than ours and they can perhaps grasp the graces that we are used to ignoring. In giving thanks, we are reminded that there are things beyond our day to day demands, beyond our day-to-day worries, and, most importantly, beyond our ability to meet those demands, be they internal or external.

The people went to Jesus looking for what they wanted—a way to make their lives easier and their worlds certain. But that is not what Jesus was offering then or now. Instead of providing the stuff of physical satisfaction and easy deliverance, Jesus instead offers what they need in the world—the satisfaction that their world and its primary fears are not the forces that have the final say in the world, the pressures of daily life not the final reality of how we must live our lives. When we take on the work of the kingdom—the work of re-orienting ourselves away from the immediate needs of our particular time and reality to be reminded of the ultimate working of a God that feeds us not just what we need, but also what we most require--the bread of heaven and the stuff of the Spirit and feeds us in abundance. The trick is that we do not always do reliance all that well because it is the last thing we are told to hold as virtue.

Our world, our systems, demand of us a certain amount of fear and worry to function well. We have to fear for our futures in order to keep up demand and to allow our worries to drive our consumption. Our thanksgiving unplugs us from that fear and asks us to recollect all that God has done in expectation of all that God is yet to do. It is a rehearsal of our relying on God and not on ourselves. I call it a rehearsal because that is what it is. There is not one of us who would not like to see a more concrete business plan when it comes to the Good Shepherd supplying our needs. Simply saying “God will supply” strikes us as perhaps spiritually odd, or at least not in our ken. Even as we, fundamentally agree, we foot note that with “but better plan to figure out how to do it yourself.”. When we give thanks we recall those times where we have indeed been met, and been supplied for beyond, perhaps, our expectations, hopes, and even dreams. But it can only ever be rehearsal because the work of following is the work of converting our selves from the sense that all the stuff that would overwhelm us from the alarm clock on down, is not the stuff that has ultimate power or final authority over us. The work of

the kingdom is that of repeatedly and deliberately reorienting ourselves to the way of the cross and the bread that never runs dry.

We give thanks, we sing Hallelujah to the living God not because we fail to see the problems of the world or are inured to the suffering of others. Quite the opposite. We sing Hallelujah anyhow in spite of the state of the world because we are not solely fed by the bread that causes our tables to groan, but because we are in the practice of remembering that it is God who gives us what we need, and it is God who is going to hold all things in God's hands even to the ends of the world. Not that we each individually believe this in all places, all situations and all times. Life is too hard for all that. My standing up here and singing "Don't worry be happy" does no one any good. But we must never lose the wonder that there is a bread that defies our expectations, provision beyond our wants, and surprises beyond our needs. Our souls do not feed by bread alone. Sometimes, our individual voices fail us amid our own rejoicing. But that is why we do not do any of this alone. Just as we cannot ever confuse the present circumstances with the reality of God in the world, we should never deny the hand of God in providing our needs just because we individually may not be in a position now to see it, let alone believe it, let alone declare it.

Celebrating/ rejoicing in/Giving thanks to God is never a denial of the reality we live in nor the concerns we carry. But it is an aspect of our worship – our rejoicing – our faith that is always beyond the sum of our moods and attitudes of right here and right now that points us to that which is far beyond us. It is a declaration of what we know to be true in the whole of the universe—that there is a God who provides enough for each one of God's children. God loves us so much that gives us all that we need, not just the stuff we want, but the stuff that feeds us beyond our expectation.

May we in giving thanks learn again of all that God is doing and rejoice come what may. The God of Love is lord over heaven and Earth. How can any of us ever keep from singing?