

Our scripture passage today occurs right after some spectacular miracles. Jesus heals a dying boy, he heals a man on the sabbath that's been crippled for 38 years, he feeds five thousand and he walks on water. But before he does all these things, he says, I believe with a great deal of chagrin, to the crowd: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

Jesus knows us. He's got the whole human condition figured out. Why is it that we so often demand a sign that God is with us? Why do we expect to be fed, or healed, or consoled? Are we too busy to do the hard work of growing in faith? Are we afraid to discover that it WILL take hard work? Wouldn't being given a sign be easier? All we'd have to do is sit back and receive. After all, as God's children, aren't we entitled to that?

Our scripture passage today, from John 6, happens after Jesus shows some miraculous signs of God's presence to the people who follow him. But Jesus knows that signs aren't enough happens after Jesus feeds the people and they want to make him king. He goes up to the mountains to pray, the disciples head into a boat – cross the sea of Galilee where a storm hits them, Jesus walks on the water to reach them and the storm subsides. "It is I, do not be afraid" are his only words. And here is where our story comes in:

NRS **John 6:24**

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there,
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 he 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.”

I AM the bread of life.

I am the BREAD of life.

What I can't help but see when I look at this passage is a comparison of breads – manna – given to sustain the body; a monotonous day after day after day for 40 years food, vs belief in Jesus Christ as God's son – to sustain the soul; a bread rich in flavor and substance. This living bread Jesus provides is more than just the same old bread they got from God in the desert – this bread is LASTING – and probably not stale.

Back in 2010, the Mennonite World Conference was in Paraguay and my church in Saskatchewan sent me and a youth to attend. Part of our time was spent on a medical mission's trip with another youth group from Calgary – travelling up and down the Paraguay river to small remote indigenous villages. While we were staying at mission central, we were fed with local food. Well local bread. We had bread made from the Cassava (or manioc) root. It's a potato – like tuber that is poisonous when eaten raw but edible when boiled. The bread made from the manioc flour is extraordinarily delicious – except when it too was stale.

The other kind of bread we were served every morning were dense white dinner rolls bought locally that, unfortunately, became progressively stale as the week went on. This bread didn't really have much of a taste, but it filled our bellies every morning - especially when they were slathered with dulce de leche.

Later that week we walked to one of the stores in town and I saw huge bags of these rolls – and realized that probably everybody ate them and that they were stale upon purchase already. That made me sad. Later, while we stayed at our residence for the conference, we ate less stale still white-floured hotdog buns.

But lest you think this is an account of the food quality in Paraguay, let me continue the story of bread. At the end of the World Conference gathering, as we were walking to our bus, I noticed a vender. This vender had something on his head – a big basket that was steaming and WOW did it smell good. For 2500 Guarani (or ~\$.50 USD) I bought the best roll I've ever eaten ... a chipa! Cassava flour, flax, cheese...and it was still warm. I cannot tell you of my pleasure.

The bread that I was fed is incomparable to the bread that I found, and bought, and ate. Or, to put it another way, the bread that I was given could never be as tasty or delightful or as delicious as the bread that I discovered.

I can only imagine what it was like for the people of Israel as they were wandering in the desert – eating only manna and quail – for years! It gets old and it gets old FAST. It was food meant for their survival.

When Jesus fed the 5000 people with 5 loaves and two fish, they were reminded of how God provided for them in the desert – and how they were saved from starvation.

And I wonder whether they asked themselves whether this present-day miracle worker, Jesus, was going to continue to give them what **they** needed to survive.

But there is a difference between just surviving and thriving – as I discovered in Paraguay. And there's a difference between being fed and finding and eating good food.

Jesus told the crowd, “²⁷Do 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.”

But this did not satisfy the crowd. “Why don't you give us a sign. 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.’ ”

The people said, “GIVE GIVE GIVE – “what signs are you going to give us? Will you give us manna like we got in the desert?” “Always give us this bread!”

Jesus replied, “**Work** for the food that endures for eternal life” and “**I AM** the bread. **COME** to me and you will never be hungry. **Believe** in me and never be thirsty.”

He did not say, “look, I'm going to give you this bread because you followed me all the way here from across the sea.”

The bread of life required the people to *become active* in their anticipation – it required a change in course – a change in thinking. The Bread of Life challenged the people then and challenges us now to change our faith from passive to active.

Our faith isn't something that we're given. If it were – we could compare it to flimsy white bread – or stale rolls. Not appealing, not sustaining, and not fulfilling. Enough to survive, yes, but not enough to THRIVE.

However, some like their faith this way because it's easy.

We can just sit back, and watch others do their thing – we can be entertained on Sunday – see all the signs and then believe - and then go home and do what we want and think what we want – but not too hard because that requires work – and we're tired from our job anyway.

Jesus tells us that real faith takes work – it requires us to actively seek Jesus out – to go to him. To eat the food of faith that they find in him. It's not easy – it's challenging and heart-rending and mind-blowingly beautiful.

Sure, I wish for signs that God is with us – we all do – and God amply provides these signs all around us. But these signs aren't – no can never be what sustains our faith.

I think about eating this bread that God provides – and being not only sustained but invigorated. I think about how my love for God and my search for Christ and Christ's path in my life leads me to all sorts of places where I never thought I would go – like here. And how eating this wonderful bread fills me with new energy to see the world through love.

Jesus is the bread of life – he invited the people then and us today here and now to a faith that goes beyond tradition and history and culture and heritage. To a faith that goes beyond God's survival provisions in the wilderness...or in times of wilderness.

Taste and see – the bread of life is full of *substance*. It's not stale white bread that we have to spread with gooey saccharine stuff to be palatable. No! It's fresh hearty bread that keeps us full and keeps us coming back for more.

So, what does that mean for you? Are you hungry for something more? Don't just wait for it to be given to you! Don't just sit there shouting "We Want Food!" "We want food!" "At least show us a sign that we're going to get food!"

Look! Listen!

Jesus calls out over time and through space – to the whole universe – COME AND GET IT!