

**Calvary Episcopal Church**  
Ashland, Kentucky  
Sermon for August 5, 2012 ~ Proper 13B  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

"Rabbi, when did you come here?" they asked him. Yesterday, on the other side of the lake, they had gathered around him to hear him teach. Late in the day, he fed them all. With five loaves and two fish he satisfied their physical hunger. Then, when the crowd started talking about making him king, he sent the disciples away so they wouldn't get caught up in the political intrigue. Jesus slipped out, too, a little later. In the night, as the disciples were making slow headway rowing against the wind on their way to the village of Capernaum, he came to them on the water and surprised them. They didn't understand that, just as they didn't understand about the loaves and fish.

So now it is today and Jesus and the disciples are in Capernaum. The crowd has discovered that Jesus and the disciples were gone and so they got into their boats and went searching. Their search led them to Capernaum. "Rabbi, when did you come here?" they asked when they found him.

You'd think Jesus might have said, "Oh, a couple of hours ago." Instead, he wades right into the crux of the matter with these followers. "You are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill yesterday. Do not work for the food that perishes. Work for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God has set his seal."

He had given them bread to eat, but he wanted them to look beyond that bread to THE Bread. That's the way it is in the Gospel According to John. Over and over again, John has Jesus giving a sign only to have his audience struggle to see beyond the sign to the thing signified. For example, Jesus pointed Nicodemus beyond birth to THE Birth, birth through the Spirit; The woman at the well talks about water. Jesus points her to THE Water - Living Water. Here, he points his listeners beyond the meal of the evening before to the true Bread, which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. And, by world, we mean the entire universe, not just planet earth, everything!

So, Jesus urges them to work for that heavenly bread. And, they ask, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Their assumption is that if they do the right things, follow the rules, God will favor them with this life-giving bread from heaven. Jesus responds to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe IN him whom God has sent." His emphasis is not upon believing in WHAT he says or even in WHO he is at the moment. His emphasis is upon trusting him enough to enter into a relationship with him.

If you ask your spouse, "do you believe in me?" You will probably not be satisfied with the response, "Yes, I believe that you exist." Or, "Yes, I believe what you tell me is true." What you are looking for is an affirmation of the strength of your relationship. You are asking, "Do you have confidence in me? Do you trust me? Do we have a sound relationship?" That's what Jesus wanted them to see - that there was more to him than acting as a kind of miraculous commissary, handing out bread to satisfy their physical hunger.

So, then, as if they hadn't had a sign the day before, they ask for a sign. They remind him of their ancestors who got a sign from Moses in the wilderness. When they were hungry, God sent bread and

quails. Now, admittedly, those people didn't recognize bread when it appeared. And, they had to learn through trial and error that their daily bread was just that, DAILY bread - it wouldn't keep more than a day. There was no "day old" bread in the wilderness. Nevertheless, the people came to relate the bread from heaven to their leader, Moses. Jesus had to remind them that it was God who gave their ancestors bread from heaven. And, he says, it is God who sends this generation bread from heaven, too. Only this time, the bread is different. The bread has a human face - HIS. And, even more, it doesn't perish the way the manna did. They ask him to give them this bread. And he does, telling them, "I am the bread of life."

In what sense are they, and we for that matter, to understand that Jesus is the true bread from heaven? As you might suspect, there are several layers of meaning here that will unfold for us as we continue the story from the sixth chapter of John over the next few Sundays. For now, in this particular passage, Jesus seems to be trying to make it clear that he is the life-giving Logos or Word as in the Prologue to this Gospel ("In the beginning was the Word ...").

The Word that reveals God is life giving. Such an interpretation of Jesus as the life-giving Word from heaven is not only congenial with this Gospel's identification of Jesus as the Word but with this Gospel's theological assumption that the fundamental human appetite, the hunger beneath all hungers, is for a word from God. No one has ever seen God, how then shall we know this God whom to know is life eternal? As Philip expressed it, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus, says our writer, not only speaks the word which proceeds from the mouth of God; Jesus is not only the messenger; Jesus is that Word; Jesus is that message - the Bread which is more than bread, the manna which the people do not know.

For 13 billion years, God has been building a universe to sustain human life. Some churches emphasize the irritable side of God and the nasty side of humanity. Our church emphasizes the immanence and providence of God - God's closeness and God's bountiful care. In our Baptism, God promises to be close to us and to care for us. In our pilgrimage as disciples of Jesus, we are going to experience getting lost, confused, scared, tired, angry, and hungry. God never promised us that our Baptism would insulate us from those experiences. But God's promises are even better. Because God promises when those things happen to us, God is going to be in the midst of those experiences, not *causing* them but *caring* for us and *feeding* us with the Bread of Life. God has done that for us more times than we can count. There have been pulpits and altars along the Way for us. It is the custom here at Calvary, as in many churches, to have holy water in a stoup at the entrance to this sacred space. As we enter, the water is there to remind us of how God launched us on the journey and how God pledged to love us and be near us and provide for us for ever. As we exit, it is there to remind us that God has a purpose for us in the universe and that God will equip us and provide for us everything we need to fulfill that purpose.

There is no famine of the Word of God. In Jesus, the messenger and the message are rolled into one loaf. Whoever lives in a relationship with him is baked into that same loaf and will find that the deepest hungers of their lives will be satisfied. No longer will those who live in him have to try to forage and hoard and steal and grasp in order to have life. Life comes with the message, the Living Bread, as a gift from God.