

2021 Aug 1 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 & John 6:24-35

Title: “A Seal Of And For Love”

Theme: 10th Sunday after Pentecost, ‘Bread of Life’

Introduction

As some of you already know, I spent this past week in Gorham, New Hampshire on the northern side of Mt. Washington, near what is called the Great Gulf Wilderness. I was at a United Church of Christ Faith-Based retreat camp called Horton Center. Throughout the 7 days and 6 six nights I spent there, the group I was with journeyed alongside both the cast of Harry Potter characters as well as Jesus’ disciples. The deans of the camp, Horton Center staff and other volunteer counselors like myself worked to show the kids that the miracles of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament are not all that different from the grace-filled magic of stories like Harry Potter.

Descriptions like this one we’ve heard from Exodus highlights this truth. I mean, what magic! Exodus 16: 13-15 - ¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

‘What is it?’ they ask -- in a way, signaling a certain disbelief.

In the gospel reading, we hear that belief is paramount - Jesus says: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes will never be thirsty.”

I can’t help but imagine the words of one of our dear congregation members this past week, the dean of the camp at which I was volunteering. Megan Magrauth proclaimed to the campers as we hiked near Tuckerman’s ravine: “Hike towards the bagels and with purpose!” (We were working to get our group to find a pep in their step when we hiked on Wednesday.) Towards the bread of life and with purpose - this is a key part of the Christian journey, no?

A great metaphor for us in a relatively small experience of preparing a group of 4th and 5th graders for a hike of moderate difficulty: we had to make sure they were ready for the journey - packing their bags, having loaded our lunches, and filled up our water. When they were on the hike, we had to remind them to stay together, not to sit down to keep from getting cramps, and to stay on the trail to take care of God’s creation. On the way back down, we made mention of how dangerous a descent can be, even though it often seems to be easier.

The raucous group showed us small miracles on our hike - sharing the food, stopping for one another, picking up crumbs and honoring other hikers on their own journeys. They hiked towards the bagels with purpose and even came back from the mountain with strength and gusto.

John 6: 27 -

“Do not work for 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 has set a seal.”

Wayne A. Meeks approaches this text from an exegetical or interpretive framework, noting that Jesus is pointing here to the common human struggle of seeking what he might have coined as, “Spiritual fast food.”¹

See prior to verse 27, Jesus has mentioned the reasons that the people have followed. He declares that the people have followed simply because they had enough food to eat, not because they were interested in the depth of the Christian journey (which for first century folks would not have been called a Christian journey). The language or wording maybe would have been the word, ‘way’ or ‘path’ in Aramaic. “You are not interested in deep spiritual food,” Jesus says --- “You are looking for a McHelping or Have it your way religion of convenience.”

¹Wayne A. Meeks, “Exegetical Perspective on John 6: 24-35,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 311.

In response, the followers ask how they, themselves, might be able to perform miracles in the ways that Jesus did. Jesus then declares the importance of belief, something that he commonly does in John; this such side of Jesus' character draws a good deal of contrast to the presentation of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, who often focuses more on faith in actions. And so, when we look at the whole framework of the gospels - the synoptics as well as John - we see that both faith and belief are of great importance. *-pause-*

Our question this week is simple - have we become like the followers and the wandering Israelites who want spiritual fast food and everything to be easy and convenient? Do we expect to have the mind and soul of a guru without the prayer and contemplation one would need?

We often show up to and for our faith when something miraculous happens in our life or when we have nowhere else to go - a baby is born in our family and so we are eternally grateful for this new life. We go through a horrible divorce or separation and so we fall down in prayer. And God is of course always ready for us when we come at these moments but what we need to realize is that those moments of deep joy and concern will be smoothed with divine grace if we continually seek Christ's peace.

8 mins, 8 seconds

See, in faith AND in action, we are sealed by God's love and God always wants us to come in prayer, in reading, in reflection - be it active or quiet reflection. We might find God on our morning walk or while meditating.

If our struggle is that we seek spiritual fast food then our grace is that God has wholesome spiritual broccoli and spinach for us.

God has said:

This dew - this morning dew - it is more than dew - it is a miracle, it is magic - this is the bread of life and when you eat it you will never hunger again.

It has been said:

God has set a seal of and for love.

A seal of love which no one can ever remove from your heart.

A seal for love that will keep you strong and calm, especially if you seek it consistently and continually.

A seal of love which you will necessarily want to share with other people.

A seal for love that hold you beside your neighbor, even the ones who you struggle to care for.

So Walk towards the bagels of lunch and life with purpose and know that there is a seal on your heart and that God has named you as beloved.

Please join us in singing hymn #330, "Let Us Break Bread Together."

Bibliography

Meeks, Wayne A. "Exegetical Perspective on John 6: 24-35." In *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 311. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.