



**August 6, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

John 6:24-35

## “A Celestial Vending Machine?”

What kind of bread do you like? When I was growing up in Nebraska, just about everyone I knew ate white bread, sliced pretty thin. We were Middle America: middle-class, midwestern folks, and we ate Wonder bread.

In recent years, with all the discussion about the effects of our diet on our health, I’ve started to buy mostly whole wheat and oatmeal kinds of bread. My family members have complained about the “little nuts and stuff” that give the bread a surprisingly rough texture, but I do still buy it and we do continue to eat it.

Bread. The staff of life. The stuff of life. It’s amazing how strong our feelings can be about something as basic as bread! Food is essential for life, to meet our most basic needs for survival.

Jesus knew about this. He knew about and cared about people’s physical needs. Our Scripture for last week was the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. The crowds were thrilled by this miracle. They were awed; they were in love with Jesus. They wanted to take him and crown him King. But Jesus slipped away. Our reading today tells us what happened next.

Jesus slipped away, but he didn’t stay hidden for long. The crowds hopped into boats, crossed the lake, and tracked him down. When Jesus saw them coming, he said to them, “I know why you’re here. I know why you tracked me down. You’re here because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

Was Jesus being critical of our basic instincts to provide for the most fundamental human needs? How could he criticize us for that? It’s almost pure instinct; implanted in us by our Creator—GOD made us this way; how could that be wrong?

Think about it. Primitive societies have been structured around food provision for the community in various ways. Some honor hunters, who are respected for their ability to read the signs in nature to track and kill their prey. Some honor those who sow and reap- the farmers. This was surely true in Jesus' day. So, what was he saying? What was he getting at?

The crowds around him were just doing what comes naturally. They had encountered what seemed to be a promising source of provisions, for themselves and for their families. What was wrong with them following up on that? Doesn't that seem prudent to you?

We might not have that same sense of needing FOOD, as they did. But we also think we should follow up on good things, don't we? I try to take advantage of good buys at the supermarket, and feel a surge of satisfaction when the kitchen shelves and refrigerator are well stocked.

If we think beyond FOOD to other things we believe we need in life, we discover more examples. We want to be sharp in our workplaces, taking advantage of promising opportunities that arise, that could benefit our careers, our organization, our company. We buy insurance, we try to invest wisely if we have funds available, we want to provide well for our families- SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT???

When the crowds gathered once again around Jesus, he pointed to TWO THINGS missing in their understandings about what he had to offer them.

FIRST, the people were hung up on CONTROL. Jesus was not offering them CONTROL. God may be the Provider, but we want to be in charge of his provision. We REALLY REALLY want God to be a Celestial Vending Machine. We want the prayers and pleas we bring to God to act as the coins that release the goodies.

The crowds around Jesus had been taken over by their hunting instincts to the point where they lost sight of their place in the universe. They didn't know or trust God. They were kidding themselves to believe that they were in any way capable of the kind of control they wanted.

I hope you see how the Bible is a mirror for us. When we see the people around Jesus thinking or behaving in certain ways, we can be pretty sure we will discover ourselves with them- in the same crowd. We too have trouble letting God be in charge. We have trouble believing God does love us, that God will not abandon us ever. We resist recognizing our dependence on God. Who wants to be like a newborn baby, unable to even hold a bottle, needing to be fed by someone bigger and stronger who cares for him?

But Jesus came to teach us those truths! First, we ARE NOT able to provide for ourselves on our own. Second, there IS someone bigger and stronger who loves us and cares for us.

Jesus wanted his people to recognize God's presence and extravagant love at work in their lives. The miracle of feeding them was one display of that love. But Jesus went on to teach them WE will never be the ones in charge!

Look at what the people did with him! They said, "Show US a sign, Jesus- WE will see. WE will weigh the evidence, WE will draw conclusions, and we MIGHT even decide to believe what you want to reveal to us." The people wanted to be in control by picking Jesus to be their king. "WE will choose and crown the ONE who looks out for us, and then we'll be OK, right?"

God is a merciful, powerful and extravagant, giving God. But we can't take hold of that power and put it in our pockets. We can't be in charge of the bread supply. We can't make God our servant, to serve OUR needs. It's just not the way it is. God is our Creator, master of the universe, and we are the created- precious and beloved. Those are just the facts, folks. And Jesus Christ, the whole gospel story shouts out those truths again and again.

So, first Jesus tried to show the crowds their problems with control issues, and then, SECOND, he nudged them to move to another level of receiving from God.

The miracle of the feeding of the multitudes addressed people's physical needs and hungers. This is not disparaged- it's truly something to celebrate and reveals God's concern for our bodies. But, Jesus taught, don't get stuck at the level of thinking that's all life and God are about: a free lunch.

Don't just care about bread! Don't be content with having only your physical appetites satisfied! There is more that God has to give you. Bread we eat is a blessing. But the Bread of Life blesses us far beyond the bread we eat for lunch.

At a worship service I attended many years ago, a young man in the choir witnessed to this in his own words. He described how he had proceeded through life- doing his best in school, falling in love, marrying his sweetheart, and beginning a promising career. "I had it all," he said, "a loving wife, a darling little girl, a comfortable home, two cars in the garage, even a cat---but something was missing. I still wasn't satisfied. It wasn't finished." The man then described how he had opened his heart to Christ. This drew him into acts of caring for others, acts of changing himself and changing the world--- THEN the hungers within him began to be nourished.

Jesus Christ told the crowds to pay attention to all their hungers, and to let go of their futile attempts to control their destinies. Let go, and let God. God has all we need.

What kind of bread does God give us? Bread that nourishes body, spirit, mind, soul,  
ALL THAT WE ARE.

As we receive communion today, we receive the Bread of Life. This Bread feeds us in ways we don't fully understand. One of the signs of our having been fed is our going forth to serve in Christ's name. We are so often like the crowds when we gather. We ask, "What can you do for us, Jesus?" We seek signs; we look for bread. Christ says here- "you can have all that I have, all that I am. I give it to you freely: cleansing for sin, hope for despair, life for death."

Jesus gives us bread for all our hungers, so we can go into the world saying, "God you have fed us. Here we are, your people. What can we do for you?"

President JFK's words connect for me here— he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country!"

Friends, the journey of faith is not about "becoming spiritual"—arriving at some wonderful plane of highly evolved mysticism. Jesus teaches us that the journey of faith calls for us to change the question we most often address to God! We're to stop asking, "What can you do for me, God?" We're to start asking, "God, what can I do for you?"—Here and now, just as I am, in this very world, with the spiritual insights I currently possess--- what can I do for you?

Let us receive the gifts of God, the Bread of Life. And then may we go from this church today as people who have been fed; people who are ready to serve in Christ's name. Amen.