

John 6:24-35 (NRSV)

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.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 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. 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." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 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? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " 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. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

As many of you may know, a couple dozen of us attended the National Youth Gathering of the Lutheran church last week. To show how cool and with it I am, instead of standing here and speaking the sermon, I'm going to text it to all of you.

No, not really. Actually, during the worship services on Sept. 20, we'll spend some time talking about what we learned at the

Gathering about ourselves and our church and world and about our God. But I couldn't help thinking a little about the Gathering as I walked with the lessons for today.

Maybe it is because I spent a week with teenagers that the theme of food came through so strongly for me in all the readings. Teens need to eat all the time, they just do, and the sooner you accommodate yourself to that, as a chaperon, the better time you will have. So I had a lot of sympathy for Moses and Aaron in the reading from Exodus. But I was surprised to discover something else – I had more sympathy than usual for the Israelites.

You see, at one point, on the way home, we were all standing in a line in an airport and one of the young men turned to me and said, "I have just got to have something to eat." Now, we'd eaten a couple of hours earlier, but this young man was not a complainer – he really was hungry, and I knew we'd better get him something to eat or we'd have a problem.

And so I had this new insight – by complaining to me, what he was saying to me, what the Israelites were saying to Moses and Aaron and God was, "Look. I am trusting you with my most basic need. I need food. Won't you help me?"

Usually when I read about the Israelites in Exodus, I have this attitude of high-minded scorn for them. Here they are on this marvelous journey of deliverance, a journey of becoming God's people, and all they can do is complain about being hungry. But, complaint is partly a measure of trust, the Israelites complain to God and to Moses because they have put their lives in God's and Moses' hands, left an existence that wasn't very good but was at least workable, for the promise of something blessed, to be God's people. And the most important thing about them is that they are, at that moment, very hungry.

And I wonder whether, as part of God's marvelous construction of us, God gave us hunger as a kind of handle to grasp us, a way of getting our attention. God's solution to the Israelites' hunger is certainly evocative – he gives them enough food for today, their daily bread, but **only** enough for today. And he gives it to them every day, except for the Sabbath, when they are allowed to store up one day's bread. So eating is a religious act, eating is a way we are connected to God, eating binds us to the source of all that is good, on a daily basis. Maybe that is why we say grace at meals, to remind us that through something as basic as hunger we are joined to God. We shouldn't scorn eating, or hunger, or complaining, because all of these issue from deeply religious impulses, the need to depend on God, to trust God and to believe God will provide.

The Gospel lesson is also about food – it begins just after John's version of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. After the meal, Jesus withdraws to the mountain, and the disciples get in the boat and row over to Capernaum. And the people are left wondering, where is Jesus? So they get into their boats and go across to Capernaum and find Jesus and the disciples there. And they ask, predictably, the least important question – “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

Jesus knows this is not the important question, so his answer goes to what really is important – in effect he says, “Look, I know you're not here because you are spiritually elevated seekers after enlightenment. I know you're not here because you've compared my theology to ancient wisdom texts and found it superior. You're here because you've been fed.” But then he goes on to say, “But there is more, there is participation in a life that is eternal. There is the bread that offers a life of meaning and purpose and beauty beyond what you have ever known.”

Their next question is also a little off, but interesting, nonetheless. “How can we do God's work?” And his answer is revealing, “This is God's work, that you believe in him who he has sent.” What does this exchange mean? The people ask, “How can

we do God's work?" and Jesus answers, implicitly, "Let God do God's work, which is to place in you a reliance on God, for food and for more than food." Once you have that, once you recognize that God has given you a longing for God, a desire for God, a need for God that is just as important, that is just as fundamental as your need for food, then you will be children of God.

You see, God doesn't ignore our need for food. God doesn't think we're weak or childish because we need food. God built us this way. God uses our need for food to point us toward God and toward an understanding that all of us are in the same boat.

At the Gathering, we heard about world hunger, about the diseases that hunger causes or allows. We learned that much of the world lives on a dollar a day or less, that 30,000 children die every day of preventable illnesses that are caused by poverty, illnesses that are caused by a lack of access to safe drinking water, or to food.

One of the speakers that most impressed our youngsters was a young man named Michel Chikwanine. He was a child soldier in the Congo – he was captured by rebels and taken away to their camp with the rest of the children in his village. He was blindfolded and given a mix of cocaine and gunpowder and when he couldn't see and was out of his mind with fear and drugs, they put a gun in his hand and told to shoot. When he did, they pulled off his blindfold and showed him he'd just killed his best friend, that now he belonged to the rebels and could never go home again. But he did. He ran and ran until he finally got home and now he speaks out to end this practice of child enslavement.

His story touched our young people deeply. They could see him, he touched their hearts in a very basic way. All of a sudden, the victims of cruelty and brutality had a human face and our youngsters understood what was at stake in the violence and the poverty of sub-Saharan Africa in ways that they hadn't before.

Later on, I asked the group what they thought we should do about what they had heard, and I remember Ben Cooper saying, “I want to go to Africa.” And I said, “Ben, I’m serious, what do you want to do?” He said, “I’m serious, too. I want to go to Africa.” And a half-dozen of our young people said, “Yeah, I want to go, too.” And I felt so humbled. Ben and the other young people could see what needed to be done, and figured they were the ones to do it. After all, that’s what we’d been saying all week. And that’s what they heard.

I suspect *we* haven’t heard the last of this – at least I hope not. The speakers at the Gathering pointed out that our young people can be an enormous force for change and for transformation, not by *ignoring* the needs of people for food and clean water and for safety but by *recognizing* that these needs are fundamental to the human condition, here and everywhere. Our youngsters understand hunger, they understand loss, they understand that they are not fundamentally different from the people we heard about during the week of the Gathering even though some of those people live half a world away. Except that when our teenagers are hungry they can usually get food and when they feel loss they have family and friends on whom they can rely. And they don’t see why it should be different for young people half a world away. And neither do I.

In the end, as Paul asks us in the final reading we do our best to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” But first is food, food for our bodies, food for our hearts and souls and minds. Food that sustains us and grows us, food comes from God, food that binds us to God. Food, glorious food. Amen.