

(Mis)Understanding Jesus: Bread of Life
John 6: 35, 41-51

Imagine the context. A crowd of people have gathered at a healing rally. Their hope sparked by a new leader on the rise. The crowd swarming Jesus as he tends to their needs. Except, it's getting late and the crowd is getting hungry. They need food. So Jesus takes some loaves and fish and has the disciples feed them. Impressed, the crowd wants to make Jesus king straight away—just imagine the policy changes he could make! But Jesus flees and the next day the crowd tries to find him, including those who we might consider the extremist religious nationalists of the day—whom John calls, “the Jews.” The crowd asks yet again for another sign—i.e. it's morning and they would like some breakfast. So Jesus takes the opportunity to address the deeper issue at hand. He says the meals are a temporary solution—a duct tape fix—but, “I am here to bring what you are truly hungry for.”

So begin with a question: What are we hungry for...really? Maybe we too would address an immediate need. Maybe we say hunger, or affordable housing, or equity in our schools. Maybe we are hungry for healing. For a miracle to make us or someone we love well again. But underneath what is the deeper longing? Recently had a friend from seminary who was surprised with a stage four lung cancer diagnosis—he was only given a few weeks to live, so he had to figure out how he wanted to spend whatever time he had left. He called me out of the blue after ten years to tell me the news and that I meant a lot to him. He made a list of people he wanted to thank for friendship. So we shared memories and a few laughs. Then I said, “Hey, I'll be praying for a miracle.” To which he responded, “I can appreciate that prayer, but I'm not holding my breath. So if that doesn't work just pray that I know when the times comes that I'm not alone.” Shortly after, he held a living funeral. The room was packed with his community. And he died 48 hours later, with a friend holding his hand knowing deep in his being that he was anything but alone. Perhaps, underneath whatever we are hungry for is often a deeper hunger for community as well. To know we are loved and that we belong—all of it funnels into a deeper hunger for a more fulfilling life, which isn't possible without community.

Jesus says he's come to bring such a life—a life that is far more expansive and whole. To open up eternal life—John's language for the Kingdom of God. Jesus hasn't come to put who is right on one side of the aisle and who is wrong on the other. That's too easy. He hasn't come to get us to believe in some muscular God who can solve all our problems. Too easy. The real work is about being stretched toward a vision for a new way of being a community. Yesterday, at the cultivating mutual mission retreat, 25 of us learned about how we could be better about honoring the agency and voices of those we are ministering to. And how often we end up making it about ourselves, what got coined “Selfie mission.” Because despite even our best intentions, we can contribute to taking away someone's agency—by projecting our needs or judgments. It's why for our Broad Based Organizing listening sessions, we need to hear stories from those outside our group. Because God's work is about bringing life to a broader base through the kind of community we all hunger for at the deeper level. (If you have any questions: Just ask our youth about their experience worshipping at The Dwelling back in March.)

Except, here's the sticky wicket: this way of life is not easily achieved. It's difficult, time consuming, unpredictable, never ending work. It requires intention and holding our systems accountable. So truthfully, there is probably a part in us—a part in me—that doesn't want to do it. Has anyone noticed that it's much easier to feed the poor than it is to build a community with the poor? Has anyone noticed: it's easier to say we desire something, but then when we see what it entails seem to find reasons to justify why we can't do it. And has anyone else noticed: it's easier to judge a situation than it is to seek understanding of it. It is why the religious nationalists grumble. And did you catch the important detail that they grumble not to Jesus, but amongst themselves *about Jesus*. The word for “grumble” is the same word in the wilderness as the Israelites grumbling about the manna sent down from heaven. It is easier to grumble amongst ourselves about something or someone than it is to seek understanding about them.

So Jesus says, “Hold on! Do not slip down the greasy slide of starting to bond over your shared grievance!” Why? Because it's not real! It's bonding which is over and against someone else. Which never builds up community, but rather tears it down. During the opening ceremonies at the Olympics, an outburst erupted over the drag performance around the feast of Dionysus—they thought it was an interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Grievances exploded over the internet and groups began grumbling amongst themselves. And it moved away us away from being in community. It is the contagion in the air these days. It's much easier to get swept into the group of complainers than it is to allow ourselves to be drawn into the life Jesus opens up. I know. I often find myself complaining about the complainers! It's so much easier to do, but it is a bonding which actually dismantles community; and it will always, *always* leave us hungry.

So what do we do? Maybe we start by confessing what is true in us—pro tip: we can't be a missional community without being a confessional one. Then maybe we can begin to practice suspending judgement as our trigger response and instead try to seek understanding if it's safe to do so. Did you hear about that liberal group from Massachusetts who after the 2016 election wanted to seek understanding. So they reached out to a conservative group in a coal town in Kentucky and asked if they could begin some dialogue. So they started by sending emails, which eventually led to the folks from Kentucky taking a trip to Massachusetts. When asked by the interviewer if the group was trepidatious to go, they said, “yes,” because they were afraid they would not be heard or accepted. But then one person named the deeper fear: “that they wouldn't forgive us for how we voted.” Meanwhile, the group in Massachusetts prepared for six months to create the most robust welcome they could: filled with community events like music and dance, drama and art. So when they had meals together and started asking questions about politics, do you know what happened? Something opened up—a fuller way of life began to blossom. So when it was time for the group from Massachusetts to visit coal country in Kentucky, no one was nervous anymore. When asked why, they said, “because we got to know them and *love them*. The interviewer said, “Hold on! I want to make sure I hear that correctly: love them?!” And both people from each group said, “yes, we love and care a great deal for each other.” Wonder: could this be the hunger that Jesus says he satisfies?

We know these moments are rare. We know they are difficult. Which is why it is easier to bond over a grievance. But it is possible when the judgement is suspended and the grumbling gives way to space for understanding. And maybe, it is then we discover a life of fuller and richer community, where it is not only God's hunger that is satisfied, but ours as well.