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John 6:24-35

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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 lake, 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.’

Imagine a humble loaf of bread. Simple. Plain.

For the better part of her 89 years, my grandmother began nearly every day baking eight loaves of bread. Of course, in her later years the abundant excess was shared between appreciative neighbors and eager children. But at the outset—that bread served a very different purpose...an essential purpose. It was used to feed her twelve children. 1/2 a loaf per child— with a bit extra for herself as well as any guests that may pop by to visit. Growing up in a poor, and fairly isolated community in south-eastern Newfoundland, bread

was one of the only staples that could be counted on in my grandmother's house. Early each morning, before the sun had risen, she would set to work—and by the time my mother and her eleven siblings would open their eyes, the smell of fresh baking bread would begin to waft its way through the upper level of their clapboard-sided home. Perhaps you can also recall similar smells, or memories.

It all sounds so very quaint, doesn't it. Charming. Old-fashioned, even.

But there is another side to this nostalgic story—that moment when the bread would run out.

The older kids noticed, especially. Though I suspect that it likely affected them all. Because as the day faded, so did the supply of bread until eventually the cupboard was bare. And with little else to fill the void—that hunger returned. Growling. Gnawing. Aching. Pestering. My uncle can clearly recall his evening prayers—'Dear God, please put bread in the pan...and from there put bread in our bellies.' Appropriate, if nothing else.

This morning's gospel reading follows immediately on the heels of Jesus feeding the multitude with only 5 loaves of barley bread, and two fish (the story that we dwelt with last Sunday). Five thousand men (plus women and children) gathered near to Jesus as he taught them. But when their stomachs began to grumble and gurgle—it didn't take long for panic to set in amongst the disciples. Where on earth are we going to get enough food to feed all these people. Or perhaps even worse yet, how are we going to afford it?! But Jesus quickly speaks the promise of abundance into the midst of their scarcity. He takes those five unimpressive loaves, and he takes those two measly fish—and then he multiplies them so that every person could be satisfied. In fact, as John tells us, there were even twelve baskets of leftovers...collected from those who had already eaten their fill! I like to imagine that they all slept soundly that night in Capernaum—with content hearts...and full bellies.

But it didn't take long for that old-familiar hunger to return. In fact, and by the very next morning that which once had provided so much satisfaction—had subsided. The growling returned. The gnawing resumed. The aching reappeared. And that pestering pit in their physical stomachs begged to be satisfied once more.

[PAUSE] Unfortunately, however, and unlike the routine in my grandmother's house—the wafting smell of fresh-baked bread was nowhere to be smelt. In fact, neither was Jesus!

And so they did only what was reasonable. In fact, they did precisely what I would expect for them to have done: they got back into their boats, and they started to search.

[PAUSE] They started to search, as this morning's psalm proclaims, for a God who was capable of providing that for which they craved.

Sound familiar? I suspect that it might.

Because, I believe, that it's at precisely this point in the story that our collective experience intersects that of those who yearned for manna in the wilderness...and of those who hungered for bread the very next morning.

[PAUSE] To put it another way— we too, are hungry...we're starving! The world is aching. We too are searching for something...anything...to fill that empty void. The problem, of course, is that at first glance there appears to be *all sorts* of bread upon which we can feast. The bread of wealth. The loaf of power. A slice of popularity. The crumbs of material goods. All of these come with big and bold claims, promising to ease that ravaging need which rages inside of God's people.

[PAUSE] But sooner or later—whether it be the next morning—or the next day—or even the next week—that hunger will return. There comes a time when the bread of this world just won't cut it anymore. And in that moment, we also return to our boats...and we too resume our search.

And so, **No**, we who have eaten today, may not quite understand the depths of human hunger that a piece of physical bread can satisfy. Thankfully, there is very little of my Mother and her sibling's experience that I can truthfully understand. But I do know (**we do know**) what it is like to hunger, to need something.

I am convinced that God uses toddlers to teach us some of faith's most important lessons. As a parent, I have always upheld the 'try-it' rule. Whether at home, or away, my son has been encouraged to give new things a try! And for the most part, Nate did pretty well with this rule.

But when he turned about 3 or 4, he started to hone his skills. Oh, he'd try everything—of course taking the tiniest bite humanly possible. But then he'd resume eating only those items that he actually enjoyed eating. Carrots, peas, and meat were typically rejected for more appealing options. Until he would firmly announce that he was full—and go back to whatever toy sat waiting for him.

You know what happened next, don't you.

Because 9 times out of 10, the dishes were barely cleared when I would inevitably hear: 'Daddy...I'm hungry!' But here's the thing—there was never a time when I refused to satisfy his hunger. Certainly, and sometimes, it meant cozying back up to those carrots that didn't quite make the cut previously. Or the peas. Other times it meant a snack to fill the void. But always, always, he knew that when he turned to his parent, he would be fed!

The hearty and fulfilling good news, dear friends, is that we also have a God whose love meets us (again...and again...and again) in the midst of our need as well.

For when we find ourselves hungering for peace amidst a racing and tumultuous world, it is God who gives us a moment of rest.

And when we hunger for healing amidst illness and disease: it is God who sits with us, and comforts us while we wait.

And when we hunger for community and connectedness: it is God who unites us into one connected body, into one community.

Fractured, broken, imperfect though we may be, God hears our cries, and **God gives us hope**. For when we ached for forgiveness, God tore open the heavens. When we were starved for direction, Christ stooped to wash his friend's feet, and told us to do likewise. And when we yearned to know that we were loved beyond all measure, it was an empty grave that whispered God's ever-satisfying grace and God's ceaselessly-satiating love into our lives...forever.

Imagine a humble loaf of bread. Simple. Plain.

And yet when our hunger pangs throb deeper than the bread of this world can truly satisfy —*when we return to our boats to resume our search*—may we find true fulfillment only in God who has sent manna into our wilderness. Manna in the form of Jesus...the bread of LIFE!

Come, all you who are hungry. For the feast has begun!

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**