Hungry?
John 6:24-35
August 2, 2015
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Today’s text deals with one of my favorite subjects: Food. I love food. I love the tastes, textures and smells. I love to shop for food, prepare food, and most of all, I love to eat food. At any given moment, I am thinking about my next meal and sometimes I’m thinking several meals ahead. I scour magazines and blogs for new recipes, and I love to try a new restaurant. I’m one of those people who will try any strange combination of food if the chef recommends it, and I will eat food from just about any part of the world.

So as I was reading the lectionary choices for this week, I was immediately drawn to today’s text. It is from the gospel of John, and from reading the preceding verses, I can tell you that this morning’s text takes place during the festival of Passover. Two very famous miracles had just taken place prior to where we will pick up today: the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water.

To jog your memory, Jesus had been preaching and the crowds were hungry, so he fed this enormous crowd with 5 loaves of bread and two fish, with plenty of leftovers. As a new parent of teenagers, I would love to know that recipe, but that is another sermon for another day. After the meal, the disciples loaded into a boat to head to Capernaum, leaving Jesus behind. There was a powerful storm on the water, and Jesus walked on water to join the disciples and see them safely to the other side.

The next morning, this same crowd that enjoyed the feast the day before were once again hungry, and they were hunting for their next meal. With growling stomachs and hungry hearts, they were in hot pursuit of Jesus and ultimately found him and his disciples across the sea at Capernaum. So now, let us join them and hear God’s word of sustenance for us today from John 6:24-35:

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. 25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 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. 27 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.” 28 Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” 30 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?” 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32 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. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” 35 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.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.
There is a great ad that I believe ran during the Super Bowl which takes place at a party of twenty somethings. Picture two young women and two men having a conversation getting to know each other. One of the women says something like, “So you both have known each other since 3rd grade? How sweet.” One of the guys, played by Joe Pesci, says in that distinctive Good Fellas tone, “What are you looking at? What, we’re not good enough for you? What, are you a super-model or something?” So his friend pulls him away and gives him a Snickers bar, telling him to eat because he gets angry when he’s hungry. As Joe Pesci begins chewing, he turns back into a young laid back guy. The tag line of the ad is “You’re not you when you’re hungry.”

There’s a whole series of those Snickers ads with different celebrities like Aretha Franklin getting sassy and hostile because of her hunger. And I love those ads because I can totally relate to them. I suppose my love affair with food grew out of these low blood sugar episodes I have had through the years where I just lost my mind until I got something to eat. Part of the human condition is the overwhelming desire and need to refuel our bodies periodically throughout the day to keep going.

Of course, I have a friend or two who will occasionally tell me that they got so busy that they forgot to eat that day. Folks, this has never happened me. Ever in my life. In fact, even as I am preaching this to you now, I’m thinking about where I’m going to lunch today. My body screams at me when it’s hungry to the point that I can’t think of anything else. I gotta have a plan to eat. It reminds me of my humanity, my vulnerability and my neediness.

I imagine that is where our crowd of the first century found themselves that morning. In their world, there was no swinging by the Teeter on the way home from work to pick up milk for the morning. They worked and slaved for their food. A drought could turn to a famine pretty quickly. Hunger was a way of life for them, and the source of their next meal was often in question. So here comes this man and his disciples preaching and probably saying some nice things, but whoa, did you see the spread of food? How did they do that? Everybody ate until they were full, so it just stands to reason that if they keep following this man, they were going to eat like kings.

You can’t blame them. They were human beings, prone to hunger and discomfort and worries and lust and all the rest of the junk with which we humans wrestle. When they spent time with Jesus the first time, their immediate needs were met. But when they found Jesus the second time, they didn’t get the spread for which they hoped. Jesus told them to stop pursuing the food that spoils and instead to seek the food that endures. Jesus was talking with them about spiritual food, but their stomachs were growling for bread and fish.

So they asked him what they needed to do to perform the works of God. What they were actually looking for was quid pro quo. Tell us what to do, Jesus, to ensure that the buffet line remains open. Give us a formula, a prescribed list of things to guarantee our sustenance, safety and comfort for a lifetime, and we will do those things. We want the manna that our ancestors got. Their understanding of faith was transactional – we do what you ask, and you take care of our needs.

And sometimes I wonder if we aren’t tempted to strike the same sort of bargain with God. In many ways, we are always seeking Manna. Many mega-churches today answer this hunger by preaching what some refer to as the prosperity gospel. If you believe in God, if you are obedient to God, then you will be blessed with riches. And it is so
tempting to believe because it gives us some measure of control over our future. We can optimize our lives by being good and trying really hard. Clearly we are far more sophisticated than our first century ancestors with our industrial-technological revolutionary era lifestyle. Yet even as we are separated by thousands of years, we suffer from the same issues. We all know where our next meals are coming from and yet still, our very vulnerable and human selves feel aches and pains and fears and hunger and doubts and anger and frustration, etc. Even surrounded by all of our creature comforts, we still feel pain and discomfort, and we seek something to soothe us. We come to this sanctuary and cry out to be fed and nurtured. Wouldn’t it be great if there were a road map to faith to be followed exactly to ensure safety and well-being?

One of my chief concerns for the church today is that we run the risk of enabling this transactional approach in faith formation. We try to create the ideal worship experience and weave together programming that implies a discipleship “how to” guide. In our consumer driven culture, the church has to compete, and so we respond with everything we can think of to make you feel comfortable. We work hard to provide clean and comfortable pews, to get the sound and temperature just right and trust me, we know it’s too hot/cold/loud and quiet. We serve muffins and coffee and lemonade and cookies. We offer fellowship opportunities so you can connect, so you don’t feel so alone in this world. We bring meals and prayer shawls and make phone calls, and send cards and stop by the hospital and serve punch at funerals and do everything we can to make everyone comfortable in this place.

Jesus appeased the crowds by filling their bellies. He wanted them to feel comfortable. And today, the church follows suit. And yet. And yet, we are still so hungry. And inconsolable. We want manna, but the thing about manna is that it only keeps you satisfied a short while. And anything leftover just spoils.

In this morning’s text, Jesus pushes back at the crowd and challenges them to go deeper. He could feed them another meal, he could continue to satiate them, but he knew that their hunger ran so much deeper than that. He knew that what they needed was spiritual food. Food that would last. Food that would carry them through times of abundance and scarcity. Bread from heaven.

Jesus knew the bread that came down from heaven was what gave life to the world. It’s not to diminish the need for our basic human requirements to be met. There’s nothing wrong with loaves and fishes or church fellowship opportunities. In fact, those are the kinds of things that begin the conversation. But Jesus is calling us to dig deeper and take it a step further. We need something of God to sustain us over the long haul. We need to feast upon bread from heaven.

I’ve always been puzzled by this concept of the bread of life. What does that mean? It always seemed so esoteric and other-dimensional to me. From a very early age, I remember hearing the language around communion described that way. The bread we will partake this morning is “bread from heaven.” The communion bread of my youth always looked more like cubed wonder bread than anything ethereal. And it always felt like such a tease to me. Like, if I didn’t know I was hungry before I took communion, that little cube of bread and splash of grape juice was sure to make my stomach growl. For someone who is as obsessed with food as I am, I wondered how is this little scrap
would you empower me to do God’s work? Fried chicken and macaroni and cheese always seemed like a more appropriate menu for the task at hand. But if all God ever did for us was to provide a big meal to satiate our bellies, we would remain in perpetual food comas and have cholesterol issues. Food for our souls is eternal. I think it is like the old adage, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Jesus wanted to feed the souls of that crowd to sustain them for a lifetime, not only for their sakes but for all of humanity. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” As I reflected on this text, I remembered a story from our congregation from a few years ago. Many of you have had the opportunity to help prepare and serve a meal at The Center of Hope. If you weren’t aware, our congregation serves one breakfast and one dinner there every month. As part of a team-building effort, the Board of Deacons served breakfast one Saturday around dawn. One of our deacons who I’m guessing would not want to be named, dared to step out from the kitchen to get to know some of the residents. Over the course of that morning, she learned not just a woman’s name, but she heard her story. This woman was new to Charlotte and to the Center of Hope, and she was fleeing from an abusive partner. She had small children and a newborn baby. She was a nurse by trade and was seeking housing and employment, trying to stay anonymous so she and her family could be safe. This deacon would form a relationship with this woman over time and walked a journey with her that would lead to her employment, her housing and even furnishings for this family’s new home. That morning pancakes were made and served, but I believe it was bread from heaven that was ultimately consumed. Another one of our deacons works out regularly at the YMCA and has many relationships there. A few years ago, he began noticing that one of his friends seemed to be having memory problems. This friend did not have any family members in the area, and through a series of conversations, it was determined that his family needed to get involved to ensure he got the care he needed. Our deacon talked to his friend and his friend’s family as they walked the journey to relocation to a memory care unit. While the relationship began as a nod and “how are you,” it transformed over time into bread from heaven. I’ve been reading Eugene Peterson’s book The Pastor, and his wife’s description of hospitality is, “hanging around this intersection between heaven and earth and seeing what there is to be done.” I am convinced that this is where bread from heaven is to be found. It is the difference between bringing a meal to someone who has had surgery vs. taking the time to sit with them to hear about their experiences. It is the difference between telling someone you will pray for them and their recent diagnosis vs. accompanying them to chemo treatments. It is the difference between giving a homeless person a couple of dollars vs. helping them get in touch with a housing agency equipped to helping them out of their situation. It’s not that bringing a meal or praying for someone or donating some money isn’t important. Clearly, Jesus thought it was important to meet critical needs, to feed the crowds with the loaves and fish. But Jesus wants to move beyond the superficial of the obvious need to offer food that does not perish, food that carries us through the long journey of life.

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To be sure, we are human. We get hungry and uncomfortable. Discomfort is distracting, and it helps to be comfortable to free us up to dig deeper. But often, we seek comfort through superficial means, and we stop there. We like our food and wine, our air-conditioning, our TempurPedic beds and our cashmere blankets. We get so caught up in addressing our human need for comfort that we neglect to take things to the next level.

So the question to pose is: Are you hungry? Snickers knows that you’re not you when you are hungry, and I think Jesus knows that too. Jesus knows that we can only be the people that God created us to be if we are feeding on spiritual food. This morning’s text reminds us to push beyond our physical needs and tend to our spiritual needs. Nurture your relationship with God, and nurture your relationships with each other. Explore ways that you can take the next step in offering hospitality to those in your midst.

So this morning, as we gather around this table to partake a nibble of heavenly food, I encourage you to think about your hunger. Let’s push our thinking beyond where to go to brunch and consider the yearning of our hearts. Are you lonely? Do you seek compassion, love, reconciliation? Come. Come and receive. Come feast at the table and eat until you are full. Amen.