

Bread Given

*A sermon preached on John 6:24-35 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on August 12, 2018*

I.

On Friday morning after working on our leaky shower faucet the night before, Josh walked downstairs to discover that water was pooling all over the floor in both the finished and unfinished parts of our basement, and that a steady stream was flowing from the handle of the main water valve. As you might imagine, a flurry of activity ensued in my house. Towels grabbed to sop up the mess. The Shop-Vac on to catch the worst of it. Buckets and basins strategically placed under the flowing water. Semi-frantic calls to plumbers we Googled. A most generous visit from our John Young, who came by to help. The problem slowed but didn't stop, the first plumber came and left, the drip accelerated again to a spray, and our 70 year-old water meter was so rusted, it couldn't be opened to cut the water off!

For hours on Friday afternoon, we waited for the city's emergency crew to come over and shut off the water, not knowing when it would get turned back on. We had a call into another plumber, but it was late on a Friday afternoon, and we didn't know if our house would be lucky enough to catch their attention before the weekend!

In between trips downstairs to empty the basins I had rigged up to catch the leaky water, I began to fill *other* vessels with water, preparing for a weekend ahead with a family of five and a dog and no water. It was as if the prospect of going without caused me to consider all the daily needs for water that all of a sudden felt immediate and necessary. I filled the coffeepot, the

teapot, several stock pots, the bathtub, Silas's humidifier, and all the water bottles and pitchers I could round up. I did all the laundry, washed all the dishes, and watered all the plants. Under the threat of a shutdown, I hoarded as much clean water as I could, all the while capturing leaky water to dump out. And faced with the prospect of limited access, I became intensely thirsty. The irony of it all was not lost on me.

II.

I'm not sure if it was in one of the trips up and down the stairs from the basement, or in the aftermath after hours with the plumber who — God bless his heart — was able to fix our issue and get our water back on as it's supposed to be, but I began to think about the events of the day. *The abundance of water, and then its scarcity; saturation and then thirst; all the while, surrounded by a different form of the very thing we needed.*

I confess I'm usually one who hears the stories from John 6 like we've heard today and scoffs a bit righteously at the crowds. But after the events of the weekend, I get it now. For here they are, coming from the most unexpected meal of their lives with thousands of their friends, a little boy with loaves and fish, and the one man who made it all possible. As we heard last week, the text says they'd eaten their fill until they were satisfied with an abundance leftover! Yet today we hear that a day later, those same crowds go looking for Jesus, seeking answers for the abundance of bread, and then its scarcity; their sustenance and then hunger; surrounded by a different form of the very thing they needed.

The first question to him came from their **curiosity**, a curiosity that had only grown since he fed them all with those five small loaves. "Rabbi,

when did you come here?” the crowds asked him. For John had explained that when the crowds failed to see Jesus’s boat, they went looking for him on the other side of the sea. But they weren’t just looking for Jesus, as if they were merely trying to locate him on a map. As with so many throughout the Gospel of John, the crowds were *seeking* Jesus: trying to pursue again what they had experienced with him the day before, desiring to comprehend the incomprehensible. Their question “when did you come here?” can more literally be translated “how did you come to be here?” or rather, “how were you begotten?”¹ This same verb appears as people throughout the Fourth Gospel try to make sense of Jesus: like the wine steward tending that wedding in Cana wondered where the new wine had come from, or like Nicodemus speculating where the ‘birth from above’ comes from, and again like the woman at the well asking where the living water comes from.

The second question came from their **responsibility**: “what must we do to perform the works of God?” Meaning: what needs accomplishing in order for us to find our fill again? What does God need from us in return? Might we run around and fill all the containers we can find with that bread, such that we won’t go hungry? We can do things, and we don’t expect it to be free.

The third question came from their **memory**: “what sign will you give us so that we can see and believe? What work are you doing today? Remember – our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness!” It’s clear from their line of questioning that this was a powerful memory that informed the crowds’ understanding of who God is and how God works. For their

¹ Helpful exegetical work this week from the Pulpit Fiction podcast on the lectionary texts for today. The recording and the show notes for the episode can be found here: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper13b>.

ancestors were people of faith, that faith provided for them in the wilderness, they are descendants from these provided-for ancestors, thus, they should enjoy the same security, right?² You can almost imagine them turning to one another and reminding them of that manna that their grandma and her grandma and her grandma always talked about. “Yes!” they’d say, “right there in the wilderness, bread just raining down from heaven!” Their amazement persisted even as one generation faded into the next. “This is surely just like that!” the crowd murmured among themselves, their bellies growling – for last night’s dinner of bread and fish had already faded. They were hungry again, and in light of the miracle of that meal, I imagine they started assuming another one was on the way.

III.

Curiosity, responsibility, memory.

These aren’t unfamiliar postures to us as we consider the hungers of our lives, right? Are not these the same approaches we bring to each other and to God, framing the questions we ask in order to make sense of the world? Don’t they describe our response to the aches in our bodies and our souls?

Sparked with curiosity, we ask: *how did you come to be here?* It’s a question that can stem from wonder, like the brilliant rainbow we spot absent a storm, the unexpected arrival of time or money that makes something now possible, or the child whose presence is still a surprise. But ‘*how did you come to be here?*’ is also a question that comes from fear, as we look suspiciously upon the neighbor we don’t recognize, the new colleague in

² FOTW, p190.

our office whose promotion seems suspect, the leader whose ideology seems so far from our own, the spot or the lump that has emerged in the dark.

Burdened with responsibility, we ask: *what work must we do?* In our physical and emotional lives, we wonder what labor we need to endure in order to make the money we need, or to buy the things we want, or to have the body we desire, or to gain the knowledge we yearn for, or to cultivate the relationships that matter, or to just make it from sunrise to sunset, day after day after day. In our spiritual lives, we catalogue the things we ought to do in order to live a Christian life, checking off the regular Bible-reading, care-offering, lesson-teaching, love-sharing, tithe-giving, prayer-walking, committee-serving, and worship-participating as tasks completed in our journey with Jesus. Daily bread to nourish our physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual hungers must be earned!

Captured by memory, we ask: *what work will God do?* We recall the past, those moments when the stars aligned and life just seemed to make sense and run smoothly and function well. We tell again the stories of our ancestors and remember the times when God felt close and clear to us, the seasons lived high atop the peaks of our faith when doubt was but a distant memory because we saw God unmistakably at work. These memories become like manna from heaven falling into the valleys when we're in them, reminding us that just because life is challenging in the moment, it hasn't always been that way. And we ache for something like what we once had, just

Curiosity, responsibility, memory. All postures in which we yearn after the sustenance that we assume comes with our daily bread: bread that comes

when you know its origin, bread that comes when you work for it, bread that comes because it did before.

Martin Luther once said that “daily bread includes everything we need for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property, work and income, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health.”³ This daily bread he describes is necessary for our health and sustainability, physical and emotional needs that create the possibility for sound mind and body. Jesus understood the profound importance of daily bread, which is why when faced with thousands of hungry people, he fed them first.

But as theologian Craig Dykstra reminds us, “trying to live by bread alone leads us inevitably to succumb to the ancient temptation to attempt to turn stones into bread. How so? By putting our nose to the grindstone, by doing our jobs, by running a company, by playing the stock market, by making the right connections. We can turn everything from computer chips and laser beams to legal briefs and leveraged buyouts into daily bread. The bread that we feed on is the bread of business and busyness and boredom, a bread known both in and out of the church. This bread will not satisfy our deepest hunger.”⁴

How absolutely Jesus knew this. He spoke of a greater nourishment, food that perpetually sustains. To the curious, he called them out, saying, ‘you look for me because you’re hungry again and want more food! Don’t seek after what perishes, but instead the food that endures.’ To the responsible, he

³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

⁴ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, p11.

sets them straight, saying, ‘this is not your work or anything you can achieve by yourself. This is the work of God.’ And to the nostalgic, he clarifies the hazy contours of their memory, saying ‘God gave [past tense] that ancient manna from heaven – God not Moses. And God gives [present tense] this true bread of heaven – God not me.’

Because to Jesus, this is bread that cannot be fully understood, achieved, or requested. It is neither deserved nor bound, earned nor won. *This bread is given* – fully, freely, fiercely, and unconditionally. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says, “whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’ In so doing, Jesus seems to remind the crowds: “this bread is not about what you can do for me, nor is it about what I can do for you. This bread is who I am.” This bread doesn’t come from curiosity, or responsibility, or memory – this bread comes from identity, the very identity of Christ.

Sisters and brothers, this is bread that is given to you and you and you and me. No amount of questions we ask to deepen understanding, or the containers of our lives filled with the daily bread of our work, or the past that has brought us today will provide for us the bread of life. It isn’t about what we can do for Jesus, nor is it what he does for us. This bread of life transforms us simply because of who Jesus is.

Encircled by the daily bread of our choosing or that has been chosen for us, how might we hunger for everlasting nourishment? And what might it take for us to cry out with the crowds, ‘give us this bread always?’

Surrounded by a different form of the very thing we need, I imagine the answer can be as simple as living water and the bread that gives us life.