

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 4, 2024

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

I was pulling together the curriculum for Confirmation this past week and we're working on our relationship skills and one of those is asking good questions to get to know people. Jesus uses questions as one of his main teaching tools. In fact, Jesus asks just over 300 questions in the New Testament. And he almost never directly answers a question put to him.

Good questions make us think, help us sort through and settle our own understanding of how we would answer that question at this moment. The best questions are ones that stick with us. That we can pull out at later moments and check where we are. How our thinking and answers have changed. In this way, the best questions are ones that do not have one static answer.

Questions are stuck in my head today because there is an implicit question in our Gospel reading. Do we follow for what Christ provides us or for who Christ is?

Jesus posits that the crowd/throng has tracked him down not because they believe in him, but because they want some leftovers. Because their bellies are full, and Jesus can get them

some more of that. Do they follow Jesus because it gets them food in their bellies?

Jesus responds by telling them don't labor for food that perishes/is destroyed/rots. Don't work for things that will just fade away. Work, spend your time and energy for food that endures/abides. That sticks not just to your ribs but sticks to who you are. This comes from the Son of Man who is the one on whom God has set God's seal. Who is that? Jesus asks. Me.

Do we follow Jesus for what Jesus provides, or for who Jesus is?

Being a Christian has been associated with health benefits like better coping with illness and better physical health, with mental health benefits like higher self-esteem, lower rates of depression, a sense of meaning and purpose. There are benefits of a community to support you and we feel a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Do we follow Jesus for what Jesus provides, or for who Jesus is?
Is it wrong to seek Jesus for what we get out of it?

Being a Christian who happens to be Lutheran, I believe it can be both/and. But in the end, one always leads the way.

There are wonderful benefits to being a follower of Jesus, but it can also be difficult. It can demand things of us. So, if the only reason we follow is because of what we get out of it, then perhaps we will be like the seed planted among the rocks or among the thorns. Other things will come and choke out the word. Especially when those other things seem to be better for us. Provide more immediate or noticeable benefits. Are easier.

Ultimately, though, Jesus says all those benefits. All those measurably good things will spoil, perish, disappear. But I, Jesus promises. I will never leave you.

I don't know about you, but sitting by the bedside as a parent dies, in the 10th time of saying to them, "Your kids are all grown and are okay.", in the waiting for the next surgery, the next treatment. It is in those moments that we find that we don't need the things that fill our belly.

What we find we need is Jesus. This visible expression of God's love for us. I wonder if the difference is what Paul is getting at in the reading from Ephesians. As children- spiritually immature, we focus on the doctrine, the proper stance on homosexuality, on who has the hottest church in town and why. But by hearing the truth spoken in love, by maturing in faith, we come to see that

the food that lasts, what counts the most, is Jesus. He alone is with us to the end.

Friends, all the things of this world will fade away. Like manna held over for tomorrow. The stuff accumulated over a lifetime will be auctioned off, taken to goodwill, or trashed because nobody wants it anymore. It's out of style.

I'm convinced that the collection of experiences is, ultimately, just as fruitless. Who knows when Alzheimer's or dementia will steal them. These things are manna- good to sustain us- but not worth spending our time accumulating more than we need. Because tomorrow it will just melt away.

What lasts is Jesus. God's Word come down to us. God's best self-expression to us. Come to love us back into life. Come to remind us that we are made to be in relationship- with God and with one another. Loving relationship, giving relationship.

This is the one who calls God's people out of enslavement- to the Egyptians, but also out of enslavement to our own desires; for other things, for power, for wealth. What saves, what lasts to eternity, is what Jesus calls us to. A life lived in pursuit of the good of our neighbor. A life lived in devotion to the God who has created all that exists. Who provides the air we breathe, the blue sky above, the crops we eat. A life lived with enough of that which will perish (food, shelter, clothing, the material things of

life, experiences) and filled to overflowing with that which endures even beyond our last mortal breath. Love shared, companionship, wisdom, laughter. Jesus.

God provides the everyday stuff we need and reminds us we are called to something beyond just that. God feeds the hungry, because they need food. God sends Jesus, the bread of life from heaven, because we need life. Life beyond what mere bread gives. Life vibrant, satisfying, full. Life lived in relationship with God and with all those who are made in God's image.

Life found here- in the assembly of those imperfect believers who sometimes hoard their manna- but just as often are inspired by the Holy Spirit to share it generously. Life found in the words of scripture and hymns. Life found in the service of others.

The question implied by Jesus today is one of those questions that lasts. Why do you follow Jesus? Is it just for what he can give you, or is it for who Jesus is? The bread of life that never spoils. The bread that we eat with our minds in scripture, with our mouths in communion. That sticks to our souls in a way we can't get rid of... and really don't want to.

This is what the reign of God is- life in Jesus. Life so flavored by his presence that it changes who we are and how we are. Life that brings life to others. Life that lasts even to the grave and beyond. May we join our voices with the crowd and declare- Sir Give us this bread always.