

## Following Jesus: Part II

*"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." (John 6:28-29)*



Last week, we began with the crowds following Jesus, which begged a question: Why do you follow Jesus? This week, Jesus gives us his answer.

We begin again with the crowd. Apparently, some of the 5000 from the miraculous feeding of the loaves and fishes are still trying to find Jesus after he would not allow them to make him king. They catch up with him on the other side of the lake and enter into a bit of a testy exchange.

Crowd: "Teacher, when did you sneak away from us?"

Jesus: "Look you don't get the signs - you just remember the free handout and want more."

Then Jesus makes a distinction between material and spiritual hunger. At the same time, he does claim a kind of authority, though not the kingship the crowd was thinking: "Don't spend your time chasing after worldly solutions to the hunger you feel," Jesus says. I, the Son of Man, do indeed have the solution to your hunger, for God has anointed me. But not as the earthly king you tried to force me to be over on the other side of the lake. I have been anointed to offer you spiritual food for what is really your spiritual hunger."

Maybe they can buy into Jesus' leadership - after all, he did feed 5000 on five loaves and two fish with plenty left over. But the crowd is stuck on the concept of performative religion. If I do this, God will give me that. *"What must we do to perform the works of God?" (John 6:28)* Jesus says it's not about performance; it's about belief. *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (John 6:29)*

Jesus' answer flies right over their heads. "OK, great prophet, so what work will you perform? We need more signs." Jesus' interlocutors have fallen into the same misunderstanding as their ancestors in the Sinai wilderness. I sympathize with both the crowd and their ancestors. When you're starving in the desert a long way from the only home you ever knew, your belly does the talking. God provided manna, the Israelites ate, they got to live another day. And if I were living hand to mouth in occupied Palestine, anyone that can produce bread from nothing is gonna be my choice for king.

Moses reminded his fellow Israelites what manna was really about. In Deuteronomy he tells them: *"He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."* (Deuteronomy 8:3) And now, Jesus reminds the crowd of the same thing: *"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."* (John 6:33)

Jesus knows his people live a hard-scrabble life. And he knows they're bound to a religion full of dos and don'ts, that tells them what works they must perform to be in

God's favor. He understands they will focus on doing whatever they need to do to get through another day.

Not unlike Moses, Jesus may sound a bit exasperated, but he gets it. He goes back and forth with the crowd. He lets them kvetch. Eventually, by reminding them of how Moses corrected their ancestors, Jesus is able to get through to them. And so finally *"They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'" (John 6:34)*

With this opening, Jesus can now tell the crowd the real reason they should follow him: *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)* Jesus' self-revelation is the divine "I am." Just like what he said to his disciples the night before on that wind-swept sea: *"It is I; do not be afraid." (John 6:20)* The Son of Man is the *"true bread from heaven." (John 6:32)*

Jesus is our manna. This is the meaning of the signs. The healings. The feeding of the 5000. Walking across the wind-tossed sea to calm a boatload of terrified disciples. All the crowd had to do, all the disciples had to do, all we have to do, is believe.

Believe in Jesus and be nourished in abundance. Share your belief and feed the world. Recalling our question from last week, this is why we follow Jesus. This is what it means to be a mere Christian.

All well and good. But the world is full of people who, like Jesus' contemporaries, live hardscrabble lives subject to oppression. Full of people, who like the Israelites in the wilderness, are at the end of their ropes just trying to survive. What good does sharing our faith in Jesus Christ do for them?

Ah, but there's really no question about whether we are called to action. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17)* The question is what comes first. Jesus calls us first to believe in him, to follow him, and then, to do as he does. Love God and neighbor. Feed the hungry. Care for the suffering and the sick. Be the answer to prayers. Jesus gives thanks to the Father and sends us to feed the multitudes. By the conviction of our faith, we become the nourishing abundance of the one who sent us. Jesus is our manna. And in Christ, we are manna for the world. This is why we follow Jesus.

Our work is simply to believe. Jesus does the rest. He does this by calling us into the community that is his Church, so beautifully described in today's reading from Ephesians. We receive the grace to speak the *"truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15)* through our membership in the Body of Christ that is the Church. *"One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." (Ephesians 4:5)* This is how we follow Jesus. This is mere Christianity. From last week's verses of Ephesians:

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)*