

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 1, 2021

Finding Jesus

John 6:25-34

At the beginning of today's text, the crowd thinks it has found Jesus. Well, yes and no. Geographically, they've located him. But from the standpoint of spiritual understanding, they still have a ways to go. It soon becomes clear that though they're with him, they don't fully grasp why he is with them.

"I tell you the truth," says Jesus, "you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill" (v. 26). Jesus is referring to the feeding miracle that he performed at the beginning of John 6. The crowd saw it and experienced it, but they haven't rightly interpreted it. They don't see it as a sign. All they know is that they went from being hungry to being full. Their bellies are telling them that following this Rabbi named Jesus has its benefits.

That's not to minimize the reality of their need for food. It's easy to overlook the fact that food scarcity was a never-ending struggle for many people in that context and culture. Just locating and securing each day's nourishment could be a job in itself. Folks like us, who may already have plans for which restaurant we're going to after church today, can lose touch with the realities of hunger that plagued the lives of ordinary people in Jesus' time. It's no wonder—indeed, it only makes sense—that many individuals attached themselves to him partly because he could provide what they needed to survive.

So Jesus isn't primarily scolding them for seeking daily bread. Rather, he's disappointed and frustrated that that's the only kind of bread they're seeking. Jesus says, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (v. 27a). The folks in the crowd have become so focused on being full that they've missed the true significance of the feeding miracle. They don't realize that they're standing face to face with the one who can give them imperishable food.

And that's what it is, a gift. The people in the crowd assume that they have to work to get what they truly hunger for. But Jesus tells them it's not a matter of what they do. It's a matter of what God does, and is doing, right in front of them. Jesus says, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (v. 29). So what God is accomplishing is belief. God sends/gives the Son, and draws people to the Son, thus creating faith. This openness to, trust in, and love for Jesus is what God's salvation project is all about. That's God's work.

From there, the Q & A between Jesus and the crowd continues. Now they want Jesus to perform a sign, so that they may believe in him, even though he already performed a sign they didn't recognize, the feeding of the five thousand. This time they want a repeat of a sign from the "old days." They remember the story of Moses and the manna, and want something like that. But once again, Jesus has to straighten them out by showing them that he's more than just another Moses. He's the bread itself.

After all the back and forth between Jesus and the crowd, they finally, by the time we reach the last verse, seem to be on the right track. "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this

bread" (v. 34). This bread, not pulled from an oven but descended from above. The bread that comes from heaven. The bread given to us here again today. Jesus himself.

I assume that he's the one you've come looking for this morning. Not me. Not the others who've gathered here with you. Though together we're the community where he's promised to be present, only Jesus can give you himself. Only he can be what, or whom, you need most.

One preacher tells about the time he was visiting the city of Calcutta in eastern India and was invited to preach at Circular Road Baptist Chapel, once pastored by the famous missionary William Carey. While the preacher waited to speak, he sat on an old worn out chair behind the pulpit, a chair used by missionary Carey almost two hundred years ago. As he sat there, he noticed a sign on the pulpit. It wasn't visible to the congregation. It was only visible to the person sitting in that chair. The sign read: "Sir, we would see Jesus." It was a quotation from another scene in John's Gospel (12:20-21), and an exhortation to the preacher that he must preach Christ in that church. Christ was the one these worshipers had come to meet. So it is with you here today.

And as you and I meet him here today, we shouldn't be surprised that he's continually working to correct any misunderstandings or false notions we have about who he is and why he has come. That includes the meaning of faith. If, as Jesus says, God is working to create belief, then it's critical that we understand what belief is all about. It's interesting that in his Gospel, John never uses the noun for faith but always its verbal form. In other words, to "believe," "have faith," "come to faith," or "put faith." This means that faith isn't a passive, distant attachment to someone. It's an active commitment to a person, namely Jesus himself.

Jesus wants our belief to be an active trust in him, a living devotion to him, not a loose, undemanding association where we're only seeking to get something from him. Notice that in our text, Jesus moves the crowd from just seeking the food he gives to desiring the true bread from heaven, the Son himself. The crowd starts out focused primarily on what Jesus can do for them, and through their dialogue with him they come to see that belief involves way more.

Just over 15 years ago, researchers conducted interviews with over 3,000 teenagers to get more insight into their religious beliefs and spiritual lives. When they summarized their findings, two of the major themes were captured as follows: "The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself." And, "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."¹ According to one of the researchers:

This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist—he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.

One conservative Protestant girl told the researchers: "God's all around you, all the time. He believes in forgiving people and whatnot, and he's there to guide us, for somebody to talk to and help us through our problems. Of course, he doesn't talk back." Though she meant that God doesn't usually directly verbally answer prayers, her comment contrasts with today's text, where Jesus does go back and forth with the crowd to help them begin to see the demands of true discipleship and the cost of authentic belief.

What those researchers found wasn't just an indication of the state of many teenagers' spiritual lives, but can be true across the age spectrum, from people at various stages of life who assemble on Sunday morning. We all need to be reminded that the God we worship and serve isn't here primarily to keep us happy and make us feel good about ourselves. True, our lives, including the struggles and problems we face, matter to God, and God is with us, working in the midst of our sufferings. God isn't a distant and uninvolved deity. The Son, who "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (v. 33) is proof of that. But God's descent into the world also means that we're called out beyond ourselves and into his mission of redemption in the world. And that call brings us face to face with the Savior, into personal engagement with ultimate issues like repentance and faith, sin and salvation, judgment and mercy, eternal life and eternal death. So belief isn't about carving a smooth path through life. Belief is deep, difficult, and demanding.

Author Max Lucado has highlighted some of the weak views that people have of Christ. He writes:

For some, Jesus is a good luck charm. The "Rabbit's Foot Redeemer." Pocket-sized. Handy. Easily packaged. Easily understood. Easily diagrammed. You can put his picture on your wall or you can stick it in your wallet as insurance. You can frame him. Dangle him from your rear view mirror or glue him to your dashboard.

His specialty? Getting you out of a jam. Need a parking place? Rub the redeemer. Need help on a quiz? Pull out the rabbit's foot. No need to have a relationship with him. No need to love him. Just keep him in your pocket next to your four-leaf clover.

For many he's an "Aladdin's Lamp Redeemer." New jobs. Pink Cadillacs. New and improved spouses. Your wish is his command. And what's more, he conveniently reenters the lamp when you don't want him around.

For others, Jesus is a "Monty Hall Redeemer." "All right, Jesus, let's make a deal. For 52 Sundays a year, I'll put on a costume coat and tie, hat and hose, and I'll endure any sermon you throw at me. In exchange, you give me the grace behind pearly gate number three."

The Rabbit's Foot Redeemer. The Aladdin's Lamp Redeemer. The Monty Hall Redeemer. Few demands, no challenges. No need for sacrifice. No need for commitment.

Sightless and heartless redeemers. Redeemers without power. That's not the Redeemer of the New Testament.²

I once attended a clergy meeting where we were discussing the subject of worship. One pastor had gotten frustrated by some comments from one of her church members. Apparently this particular parishioner had complained that she wasn't getting much out of the worship service. The pastor, who had responded nicely and gently at the time, felt more free to speak her mind in our meeting. "I felt like saying to her, 'Okay, so you didn't get much out of the service. But what did God get out of you?'"

As we now come together at the Lord's table, remember the bread that has come down from heaven in the form of the Son. Be spiritually nourished. Be fed. Receive what Jesus has to give you. There's nothing wrong with coming here today and getting something from Jesus. But also carefully consider what Jesus is getting from you.

¹ Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith." CERC website. <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> (July 29, 2021).

² Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday* (Waco: Word, 2004) 89-90.