



Seeking Signs
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 4, 2024
John 6:24-35
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

It is human nature that we are always looking for signs. Signs to point us in the right direction, signs to affirm or reject what we are planning or hoping for. Should I take this job or not? Show me a sign. Should I retire or not? Show me a sign. Should I invest my money in a certain way? Should I pursue this alternative treatment for my illness? We might even pray aloud: God, show me a sign, I'm right here, I need it now!

Then there are signs that warn us about what might be coming. This is the purpose of many of the most amusing road signs that we might come across.

We also seek signs to point to God's absence, using our calamities to try and prove it: "God, How could you have allowed these things to happen? Where are you? Why have you abandoned me?"

When it comes to God's presence, we also demand signs, even when the evidence is right in front of us. Our first reading today gives us the quintessential expression of this. On their hard journey through wilderness, the people of Israel welcomed and ate the manna, but that was not enough to prove in their minds that Moses was a prophet of God. At the beginning of the next chapter, the Israelites are back to quarreling with him, having forgotten how he had so clearly been showing himself to be directly speaking to them for God.

We also justify unbelief when we ask for signs and none are forthcoming. The feeding of the 4,000 in Matthew 15 wasn't enough for the Pharisees and Sadducees; right after that they test Jesus by demanding that he show them a sign from heaven. In Luke 12 Jesus reproves the crowd for knowing how to interpret signs indicating changes of weather but being clueless about the sign of God's kingdom who stands before them.

Why do we have such a hard time recognizing sign of God's presence? Throughout the Gospel of John Jesus shows himself in many ways to be the revelation of the God the Father, only to be rejected. Not even the raising of Lazarus was enough; instead they used it as a sign that Jesus should be destroyed.

Today's Gospel is telling us that we don't need food falling from the sky, or a miraculous healing, or a life brought back from the death. Today the presence of God is manifested through the most common substance that defines human community – bread.

In last week's Gospel reading Jesus testified to his identity by producing an over-abundance of bread to meet a pressing need-- the hunger of the huge crowd. Today he uses that same substance to identify himself not as a sign but as the reality toward which all the signs they they've been seeking are pointing.

Jesus begins by laying bare their self-centered intentions. You have come here wanting once again to eat your fill, as you did on the other side of the lake. But I am here to give you that because of which you will never again be hungry. The bread that will feed to overflowing your deep emptiness. The bread that will restore your hope, the bread that will fuel your faith, the bread that will keep you and sustain you in every dark valley through which you should pass. The bread that is for all people, the bread gives life to the entire world.

Their impassioned response: sir, give us this bread always!

It's entirely possible that at this moment they expecting another miracle, countless loaves continuing to materialize, that would continue to feed them for as long as they like. Imagine their shock when Jesus tells them, "I am the bread of life."

And what is their reaction? Are they like the Samaritan woman at the well who begged to be given the springs of water gushing up to eternal life which she recognized in Jesus, and who then hurried to tell everyone what she had realized -- making her the first apostle of Jesus in John's gospel? No, because just a few verses later the people begin to complain about Jesus all over again.

We have in these pages Jesus' own testimony of his identity and mission. But what if Scripture alone is not enough to sustain you? Here at Grace we have two tangible expressions among us of Jesus as the bread of life.

The first is the sacrament of Holy Communion -- not a sign or a symbol or a remembrance, but a reality. Every week we take into our bodies the real presence of Christ in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine. This is the means by which Christ's body and blood are shared with the world. We take Christ into our bodies, for the life of the world. As one person said in our fourth Sunday forum last Sunday, they would take communion every day if they could.

We find another expression of Christ's presence among us in our soup suppers. Have you experienced these yet? Initially Lou Farrell planned for them to provide a nutritious meal to those who didn't have that otherwise, but what we've now found is that new human community is being formed and re-formed each week through the breaking of bread together. Faith is being strengthened. "Feasting together, stranger turned to friend," as we will sing in a moment.

Our soups are always delicious, but to me it is the image of the marvelous abundance of bread that greets us every week when Jaime Kaler drops off massive bags from Hearth Bakery, and then the sharing of that bread, through which we experience the primary dynamic of the Christian life -- abiding in Christ.

Our greatest calling is not specifically to make disciples, but to be Christ for others, loving them as Jesus loves us.