

## What We Want, What We Need

Our Scripture readings pick up right where we left off last week. King David has gotten everything he wanted. Having had his way with the beautiful Bathsheba and surreptitiously arranged for her husband to die in battle, David does what some might call “the honorable thing” and marries her, acknowledging her unborn son as his own. He might have gotten away with it if his human subjects were the only ones watching. But the Lord God of Hosts sees it all, as he always sees everything, and he’s *seriously* ticked off. Adonai sends his prophet Nathan to confront David. Nathan uses a clever parable to trap the king into condemning himself, then lays out in excruciating detail how God plans to punish David for his secret misdeeds. Whatever comfortable excuses David has been making for himself disappear as he confesses, “I have sinned against the Lord.” We hear in this morning’s psalm, which David is believed to have written immediately after his encounter with Nathan, how deeply the king regrets and repents of his sins. We can hope that Adonai will forgive him, but the damage is done, and the consequences will tear David’s house apart.

In John’s Gospel, the five thousand folks whom Jesus treated to a hearty meal last week have followed him across the Sea of Galilee for all the wrong reasons. We really can’t blame them. Living under Roman domination, most members of Jesus’s community scraped by at or below subsistence level, working hard at farming or fishing. The promise of free food must have been a massive draw. Jesus urges them to come to him not for physical bread to feed their bodies, but for “the true bread of heaven” to feed their souls. Struggling to understand, the people ask Jesus for a sign so they can believe him – as if the miraculous meal he served the previous day wasn’t enough – referring back to Moses and the manna that the Hebrews ate while wandering in the wilderness. Jesus explains more patiently than many of us might that it was the Father, not

Moses, who gave the Hebrews the true bread of heaven. When the people ask him to give them that bread always, Jesus replies, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Thus, Jesus begins the soliloquy that Bible scholars call the Bread of Life discourse. It continues to the end of Chapter Six of John’s Gospel, and we’ll be studying it for the rest of August. There’s a lot that we can, and will, say about bread and its importance in Jesus’s ministry. But before we focus on the specifics of this discourse, let’s look at the larger pattern that it shares with the others.

When Jesus speaks in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, his words tend to be focused and fairly brief. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus goes to considerable lengths to explain himself and his saving role in his Father’s plan to bring the Kingdom to earth. So, for example, the Good Shepherd discourse takes up fully eighteen verses in Chapter 10. As Professor Craig R. Koester points out in his 2008 article, “The Discourses in John’s Gospel,” the discourses “often have enigmatic elements that are difficult to interpret ... [and] do not necessarily follow a clear and logical progression. Jesus introduces a theme, moves on to another theme and then circles back to pick up an earlier point.” One important thing Professor Koester doesn’t mention is that Jesus’s discourses contain powerful “I am” statements such as “I am the good shepherd” or “I am the bread of life.” These statements hearken back to Adonai’s self-revelation to Moses in the Book of Exodus when he declares, “I AM WHO I AM.” Whenever Jesus says, “I am” and claims the attributes of deity, he’s identifying himself as God.

You may have noticed that Jesus’s interactions with the people are strikingly similar to his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. When she comes to draw water, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman “living water” so that she will never thirst again. She, like Jesus’s

hungry followers in this morning's passage, misunderstands his promise, and asks Jesus to give her living water so she won't have to keep coming back to the well. Her concern, like theirs, is with her bodily needs. Jesus asks her, and his followers here, to focus on their spiritual hunger and thirst. And in describing himself as the source of living water and the Bread of Life, Jesus is saying that he alone can give his followers the spiritual nourishment that they most need.

Jesus's choice to identify himself with such homely things as water and bread is revealing. Water is essential to all life on Earth. Even creatures who inhabit the driest deserts and highest mountains need a little water to survive. And bread has been a simple, staple food consumed around the world for centuries by rich and poor alike. As the only begotten Son of God, Jesus could have likened himself to a blazing sunrise, a majestic mountain, or the mystical, dancing star that led the Magi to his cradle. Instead, he chose bread. Not exotic Roman tidbits, roasted sacrificial meat, or elaborate pastries drenched in honey and wine – plain, honest bread. That tells us how Jesus saw his mission. He wasn't out to dazzle or tantalize anybody. Jesus came to us so he could give everyone who comes to him not necessarily whatever they want, but what they fundamentally need the most.

That's where we can best see the contrast between King David and Jesus in these two passages. It's clear from Adonai's words spoken through Nathan that David didn't *need* to take Bathsheba as his wife and arrange her husband's death. He did those things because he wanted her enough to despise God's word and risk God's wrath to get her. That tells us just how dangerous it can be when we want something so badly that we fail to consider first whether getting it will be good for us and respectful of God's word.

Human beings require extraordinarily little to live well. Healthy food, clean water, simple shelter, decent medical care, education, and community are really all we need. But how many of

us are satisfied with that? Our socio-economic structure in modern America is built on rampant consumerism, and it seems as though there's always something more or better to want than what we already have. I'm as bad about wanting things as anyone, so please don't hear me criticizing your spending or living habits. It can be a delight to get something we want, whether it's a flashy car, a bigger house, or a new romance. But when we start to believe that we can't live without a particular something, when we become addicted to something that makes us sick, and especially when we're determined to have something even if we must violate God's laws to get it, wanting becomes pure poison to the body and soul.

Left to our own devices, people don't deal especially well with wanting. We don't always know what's good for us, or when what we already have is enough. When our wants drive us to unhealthy or shameful actions, we may regret and repent like David, but the consequences of our wanting can wreak havoc in our lives. That's where Jesus comes in. It's not just safe to want Jesus, he's the safest thing we can possibly want. As Bible scholar David F. Ford writes, Jesus is *"not only the ultimate reality but the One who is to be desired utterly*. He relativizes all other realities and desires. There is no necessary conflict or competition with them ... Jesus does literally feed people; but they do not live by bread alone. The abundance of the feeding both is good in itself and points to the permanent abundance of eternal life. The reality of Jesus and what he gives is to be desired above all."

When the people asked Jesus for a sign, they'd forgotten or misunderstood the miracle they witnessed just the day before. God continually blesses us by providing everything we really need. That should be a sufficient sign for us. When we want a loving relationship with Jesus most of all, we can trust that our true needs will be met, and our lesser wants won't consume us. We can drink living water and enjoy the Bread of Life. There is no finer feast than that. Amen.