

8-2-09

Three loaves of bread

John 6:22-40

I have had many phone calls from unknown neighbors who asked for help in time of desperate need. We don't have resources in our church to help people for their monetary needs. It is for me very hard to say "No! I don't have what you need." But their requests have been meaningful reminders that the church needs to be challenged by rethinking the ministry of God.

One day when Peter and John were going up to the Temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon, they were met by a man who was crippled from birth, demanding help from them. He had been carried to the Temple gate every day. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Then, Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Walk!" Then Peter took him by his right hand, helping him up, and instantly the man was able to walk. This gift that Peter gave to him was the real help he needed. This is a famous story that the church should hear repeatedly.

After meditation reflecting on the scripture, John 6:22-40, and the phone calls for help, I was reminded of the Lord's saying, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread.'" (Luke 11:5) Some one desperately needs three loaves of bread and so visits one's friend at midnight to ask for it. Today's sermon title is, therefore, "Three loaves of Bread."

The time is midnight, deep into the darkness, in which time we are living in American history today. People are in despair and are experiencing frustration in many ways. The time is always "midnight," a time in life deep into the darkness, when people come asking for help desperately. But I, we, don't have money to give them. Poverty is one of urgent problems in our society. If you were the governor of Wyoming, it would be your duty to protect the people of the state from at least three things: Crime, poverty, and disease, which are triple issues facing our society today. As an agent of the Kingdom of God in the world, the church should be agonized by these issues in terms of ministry.

I would like to invite you to rethink and pray deeply about the bread that we should provide for those who are asking desperately for help in the midnight of despair. People ask for three loaves of bread from us..

The scripture for today, John 6:22-40, is a story after the miracle in which Jesus our Lord fed with five loaves of bread and two fishes the five thousand. After they ate the bread that the Lord provided by performing a miracle, the people were looking for him. When they found the Lord on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of your loaves. Do not work for food

that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

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In those short dialogues between the Lord and the people who were looking for the Lord, I imagine three loaves of bread that this age needs.

During the time of the human rights movement in 1960's, Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon, "A Knock at Midnight." He interpreted three loaves of bread metaphorically, "Faith, Hope and Love," because people have lost faith in God and deeply long for hope and love. But now, this morning, I'm interpreting these three loaves of bread differently reflecting on our lives today.

The first loaf of bread is "our daily bread."

Jesus knew the necessity of our daily bread, so He taught us to include this need in our prayer. What to eat is one of the fundamental problems in the world. Do you know that over half of the people on planet earth do not have enough to eat? Thousands die daily from malnutrition and related diseases.

The people who were following and gathered around Jesus were seeking the daily bread from Him. Starving is the most painful experience in human life. It dehumanizes people when people are facing it. I had an experience of starving when I was in military training in Korea a long time ago in the late 1970's. Eight hours of basic infantry training makes a person crazy and animal-like in behavior, forgetting human dignity.

Military training in the Korean army is one of the hardest physical training regimens in the world. You cannot imagine how hard it is. There was not enough food for the military trainees at that time. I was in line for a meal at lunch time, and fortunately, I had enough served to me to make a meal. After taking the plate of food, I closed my eyes for a moment to say a prayer over the meal. But, when I opened my eyes, I found that someone had stolen much of my meal right off my plate! I was almost to shout, "Who took my food?" But, I realized that I had another kind of meal—my dignity. Then, I said to myself, "Man does not live by bread only."

After I completed military training in the Korean military, I found that I had a new confidence—that now, I could endure any difficulty in life. During the infantry training, I experienced what starving felt like, if only temporarily. After that experience, I affirmed that I should help anybody who asks for food in any situation. Starving dehumanizes people, which leads them to abandon their dignity.

Sharing food is an imperative for Christian life. Seeking food is a fundamental need for human life. But, living for food or working only for bread is also dehumanizing, and also leads to the loss of human dignity.

The second loaf of bread is the "bread of labor."

Work without bread is a misfortune, but food without work also an unfortunate life. A human being is a being that seeks meaning in life. Without meaning life, life is not life but only a series of acts of consumption.

About thirty five years ago, I read and remembered a book, “Jonathan Livingston Seagull,” written by Richard Bach. The name, “Jonathan Livingston” personified a seagull, a major figure in the book. This book was on the top of the New York Times’ Best Seller list 1973. This book reminds me still of a picture of a flying seagull in my mind.

The book tells the story of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a seagull who is bored with the daily squabbles over food. One early morning, with the world still much shrouded in darkness, and beams of sunlight rising and mixing on the sea, Jonathan sat on the top of the rocky sea wall. He watched his fellow seagulls flying toward the shore to get food from a fishing vessel which had unloaded its catch of fish on the shore. On the beach remained uncollected fish, which had been freed from the nets. All the seagulls flew as swift as lightning. Jonathan thought him self, “Wings are given to us as a gift from God. Are those wings given us for the rotten fishes?”

Jonathan didn’t want to use his wings for that. Seized by a passion for flight, he pushed himself, learning everything he could about flying, until finally, his unwillingness to conform resulted in his expulsion from his flock. An outcast, he continues to learn, becoming increasingly pleased with his abilities as he leads an idyllic life.

One day, Jonathan is met by two seagulls who take him to a “higher plane of existence” where he meets other gulls who love to fly. Wings symbolize the unlimited idea of freedom, an image of the great seagull. This is a part of the story that I still hold in my memory of this book. The image of the flying seagull is same image as what a Christian is meant to be. To have faith for us is the same as to have wings for a seagull.

One day Jesus met a woman, a Samaritan woman, at a well in a town called Samaria. Jesus was waiting for someone to help him draw water from the well. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus asked for a drink. This request that Jesus made to this woman started a dialogue between them. Through the dialogue, Jesus gave her living water, faith hope and love to live. She was overflowing with joy and gratitude by the Lord’s encouragement.

Meanwhile he was talking to this woman, his disciples returned from their task of buying lunches from town and urged him to eat something. But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you don’t know.” And he said again, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

The simple rules, the Wesleyan way of living, are: “Do no harm, do as much good as you can, and stay in love with God.” Doing good is not the premise of Christian salvation but is the food, the bread of work, bread of meaning for Christian life. The search for a

meaningful life is not simply a private, individual matter. It involves the whole human creation.

The last loaf of bread is the bread of life.

There is another kind of bread for life. The Lord said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." Material bread will be temporal, and for consumption for physical life. But, there is another kind of bread for spiritual life.

Faith that professes the Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior is the food for eternal life. A theologian, Paul Tillich, said, "Faith is the courage to be." When you find a deep meaning and fulfillment of life, then you will discover courage to "be."

Jesus enlightened the way to human dignity and freed us from shame and guilt. He equips us with wings of liberty to fly into eternity. Human dignity, liberty, and eternity are there when you encounter the Lord Jesus Christ in your life. Jesus said, "If you live in me you will know the truth and that truth set you free." We are imprisoned by things like greed, worry, shame and guilt. Our hopes are captured by this world, this materialism and this limited time of human life. We are not free.

Listen to the words of Pascal, in the seventeenth century:

"When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity that lies before and after it, when I consider the little space I fill and I see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I rest frightened, and astonished, for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there. Why now rather than then? Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been ascribed to me?"

Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10) Christ is power, authority, and life eternal. Christian faith affirms the reality of a new being, a new creation, a new life in the spirit. Paul, who knew a great deal from personal experience about these matters, wrote to the Corinthians, ". . . if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

God provides us daily bread and encourages us to share the bread of meaning, and gives us the bread of eternal life through Christ our Lord. These three loaves of bread is the bread that the church needs to provide to those who ask of help from us.