

Q&A
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I have a distinct memory from high school of an evening at home, doing homework, and my mom being on the phone with Cingular, our cell phone company for multiple hours. My father had gone into the store a few weeks earlier, because his phone was due for an upgrade. And somehow, during that simple transaction, he had agreed to a different phone plan that was supposed to be cheaper, but of course it raised our bill by a couple of hundred dollars. So my mom called Cingular and a couple of hours later they switched everything back to the way it was and refunded my parents' money. But the initial issue was that my dad went into the store for one thing, to have one conversation, and instead of just giving him what he needed, a completely different conversation took place and the result was really frustrating.

It's frustrating, and sometimes infuriating, to have a conversation, or a transaction, or any kind of communication, where you think you're talking about one thing, and the other person is talking about something completely different. We've all experienced this. Sometimes it's trying to change your phone plan. Sometimes it's watching a political debate, where a candidate gets asked a pointed question and their response somehow transitions into a completely different topic. Or, maybe it's when you need to vent to a friend, just vent out your feelings, and they - well-meaning, of course - don't give you a chance to vent but instead tell you how to fix all your problems.

This passage in John is well-known and frequently quoted, but the first part of it really makes me think of these frustrating conversations. For some background, just before this passage is the feeding of the 5,000, and then Jesus walking on water. So the "they" in the beginning of this passage is the people who were fed with the loaves and fishes, and then they woke up, and Jesus was on the other side of the sea, and they didn't know how he had gotten there. After they find him, what follows is a pretty strange question and answer session.

So they ask Jesus, "how did you get here?" Pretty straightforward question. And Jesus says, "You're not looking for me because you've seen signs about who I am, you're looking for me because I fed you." Then he warns them, "Don't work for food that perishes, work for eternal food from God." That's a pretty intense answer for a pretty simple question, and it doesn't actually answer the question that was asked.

Then, the crowd asks, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus responds, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent." This answer is a little more direct, but also not really clear.

Now the crowd starts kind of getting with Jesus, so they ask, "Okay, what signs are you going to give us then?" And then they ask about their ancestors, who were given bread from heaven. And instead of telling them what signs, Jesus says, "By the way, it wasn't Moses who gave you bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread." And he elaborates that the bread from God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. And they respond, okay, give us this bread always. Jesus then elaborates more and calls himself the bread of life, that whoever comes to him will never be hungry or thirsty, and that he has come down from heaven to do the will of his Father.

I can almost picture the crowd in this story, listening to Jesus, trying to get at the essence of what Jesus is trying to tell them. They're asking him, please, tell us what we need to do, and he keeps giving them these kind of weird metaphorical answers. This Scripture gives us a pretty succinct version of the conversation, but I can imagine people in the crowd looking at each other and saying, why is this guy not answering our questions? Why is he not giving us what we need? It's that off-kilter communication, where they're trying to talk about one thing, and Jesus is talking about something different.

Jesus as the bread of life is an image that speaks to us in a powerful way, because everyone can relate to it. "What is the bread of my life?," we ask ourselves. What is that simple, wholesome, sustaining thing that I need most of all?

I saw an image on a blog recently that was a list. At the top, it said, "I need," and then below were written several things that were all crossed out. So it said things like, I need: to make more money, to get more things done, to be the best, to be perfect. All of those things were crossed out, and at the bottom was written, "Jesus." The idea is that, at the end of the day, we need one thing and one thing only, and that is to know that we are safe in the arms of a loving God who cares for us no matter what.

It is very easy to say that when we're sitting in a beautiful room, that's comfortable, with food in our stomachs, and access to clean water. To many of us, Jesus the bread of life, the thing that nourishes us and sustains us, looks like time and space to think and reflect about what Jesus wants for our lives. Maybe the bread that we need is quiet time in the morning to read the Bible and pray. Or a Sunday school class where we can discuss things with our friends. But we are only able to take that time and space because all of our basic needs are met: food, water, shelter, safety and security. So now we can build meaningful relationships and think about how we might find fulfillment, create something beautiful, or help others find their gifts.

So then the question becomes: what does Jesus the bread of life look like for people who have needs different than mine?

In my office, I have hanging on the wall a quote from Desmond Tutu. It is one of my favorites that resonates with me no matter how many times I read it. It says: "The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political or social?' He said, 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread."

Another quote, this one by Gandhi, puts it even more pointedly. He said, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God can not appear to them except in the form of bread."

For someone struggling to meet their most basic needs, that list with all the things crossed off might be very simple. There is no striving for perfection, for creativity, for success. When you are hungry, that is the only thing that matters. Jesus the bread of life is literal bread, or literal water, or even a basic shelter.

To someone who has food, water, and shelter, but who lives without safety and security, the bread of life might be a new home in a safer neighborhood. It might be a job that pays enough

and maybe has benefits for them and their family. It might be the medical test that comes back clear after years of illness, that means that they, too, can plan for the future.

When we stop to take a look at ourselves, our church, and our community - What do we see? What is being asked of us, and how are we answering? How we answer, or don't answer, someone's question, is indicative not only of what we believe about ourselves, but what we believe about our God. What meaning does the concept of a loving God have to someone who is literally starving? Starving for food, starving for clean water, starving for warmth from the cold? We can talk all day about the love God has for us, about the love that provides all we need - but if we truly believe in that love then we are called to provide for the needs of others. If someone is asking for bread, we need to respond with bread.

Or, let's say that someone has their basic needs met - they have job security and health care and food on the table. So what meaning does the concept of a loving God have for someone who is starving emotionally? Starving for justice, for a space to be heard, for a place to be accepted no matter what?

This passage speaks to us in a very intimate, human way. We are all, I believe, humbly and sincerely asking God what we can do to bring God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We search ourselves deeply and ask God to show us our gifts, to show us our strengths and abilities, so that we do God's work. But this cannot be an entirely internal process. There is a time for self-reflection and soul-digging, and there is a time to simply get out in the world and act. To feed the hungry, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the outcast. Sometimes, these things can be complicated and involved, and other time, they are so simple.

This is not a call to just barge into any situation that we see and try to "fix things." Not everything is as simple as handing someone a loaf of bread. More complex situations require reflection, discernment, and thoughtfulness. When we see injustice, the answer may not be to jump in and tell everyone what they should be doing, but to offer support, encouragement, and solidarity.

I read a short article recently by a relationship counselor who talked about the power of asking the question: "What do you need from me?" In our eagerness to show our loved ones how much we care, we often listen to them just long enough for them to state what problem they're having, and then we jump in with a solution. But when you ask someone, "what do you need from me?" this question, at its very core, tells someone, "I hear you, you are important, and you have a place in this world." It's not about fixing a problem, at least not right away, or even intuitively knowing what someone needs, which is sometimes impossible. It's about telling someone that you care what they have to say, and that you're open to listening to them.

So, where does this leave us with this passage from John? Because the people are asking questions and Jesus isn't really giving them direct answers. If we turn this Q&A session around, we see that Jesus is telling the people - look, here's what you need to know. You're asking me these questions, but here is the important thing - I am the bread of life. Which to the crowd, may be kind of annoying because it feels like Jesus is ignoring all their questions.

The beautiful thing about this metaphor of bread, about Jesus saying "I am the bread of life," is that it is simultaneously intimate and universal - it is personal but we know everyone can

understand it. Jesus's responses to the crowd in this passage might seem weird and off-kilter on the surface. They might look like those frustrating conversations that are an inevitable part of life. But, instead, I think of them as the conversations you have with a teacher and mentor who is constantly pushing you to think beyond your boundaries. To think about the big picture, the places you want to go, the people you to whom you want to connect.

The bread of life can be embodied in so many ways. "Bread of Life" is, after all, only one the many names of Jesus. There's also Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Redeemer, and God With Us. If we want to respond to a need, if we want to answer someone's question, all we may need to do is be open and ask, "what do you need from me?" And then listen to the answer. Is it bread? Is it acceptance? Is it healing? Our response to these needs have so much potential, so much power. May we ask, may we listen, and then may we find a way to respond that embodies the love and grace of God. Amen.