

John 6:24–35 (NRSV)

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him 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 the loaves. Do not work for the 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.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

A Leap of Faith

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Scripture: John 6:24–35

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, says Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. They are two sides of the same coin. Jesus faced it all the time. Prove it to me, and I will believe you. Show me a sign. Show me a miracle. Or show me an airtight philosophical proof. Then I'll believe what you tell me.

It's what Doubting Thomas wanted. Prove it to me. Show me the wounds in his side, and then I'll believe. In the end it's one of the reasons Judas turned on him; Jesus just didn't offer enough proof.

In the musical Jesus Christ, Superstar even King Herod gets in on the act. Herod has heard all about the things Jesus could do, but he wanted to see for himself. Herod sings, "Prove to me that you're divine; change my water into wine." "Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool." "If you are the Christ, feed my household with this bread." Herod ridicules Jesus and sounds blasphemous in these lyrics, but they are really the same questions and the same demands that Jesus's closest followers have. Show me.

Jesus must have grown tired of having to prove himself over and over again. Day after day they needed assurance.

All of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus feeding thousands with a loaf and a few fish. Mark and Matthew both tell the story twice. Actually, they tell of two similar incidents. The stories illustrate Jesus' uphill battle. In Mark 6 Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish. In Mark 8, less than two chapters later Jesus feeds four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish. It's not, as some have suggested, that Mark and Matthew are repeating the same story with slightly different details, as if they forgot they just told it a couple of chapters ago. There are two occasions within days of each other.

In the first story Jesus asks his disciples how much food they have to feed the crowd, and they sarcastically answer five loaves and two fish. Duh. As we all know Jesus fed the crowd and even had leftovers. In the second story again Jesus has been teaching the crowd out in the wilderness, this time for three full days, and everyone is just about out of food. Jesus again tells the disciples to feed the crowd, and they answer, again with incredulity, "How can we feed these people here in the desert with no food?" Jesus then asks them, "How many loaves do you have?" Sheepishly we may imagine, as they remember what happened just a few days ago, they said, "Okay, seven. We know what you're going to do now."

The point of this doublet of stories isn't so much to prove that the disciples have poor memories. It's not even to suggest that they weren't impressed by what Jesus had done the first time. It is, though, a pair of stories, and they are told within a larger story. The bread of life, which comes from heaven lasts forever. Jesus ultimately wants to say that the miracle or sign that he worked in the bread, as remarkable as it is, is as unsatisfying as the bread they eat. The effect of the miracle doesn't last. He has to keep doing them over and over.

In the Gospel of John Jesus talks a lot about living water and living bread. At the well he tells the Samaritan woman that he can offer her living water, and she will never be thirsty again.

In today's passage Jesus tells the disciples to work for bread that doesn't perish but lasts eternally, which will never leave them hungry.

Food is important, of course, but it is not all there is. We do not live by bread alone Jesus says. And indeed, the bread we eat is ephemeral. At noon we eat our fill, and by sundown we are hungry again. It is even more so with water. We quench our thirst, but several times a day we are once more thirsty.

Jesus is very cool. Just saying; Jesus is cool. He works these miracles, these signs, with bread, and then tells the disciples that this bread is not the important bread. At the same time he demonstrates for them that the miracles themselves are also not his important work, either. Like bread and water, the miracles leave the disciples hungry and thirsty soon again. He fed five thousand with five loaves and seven fish. But a few days later they couldn't even remember that he did. The life of the miracle was short. It did not fill them with true and enduring spiritual sustenance.

So, too, King Herod had good reports about what the signs that Jesus could perform. But he needed to see them for himself. And we can bet that he, like the disciples, would have needed him to do them over and over again, something like a drug fix.

Plato tells a wonderful story, the allegory of the cave. In the allegory, Plato tells of prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. [Slide 1] All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see.

Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows.

When the prisoners are released, they can turn their heads and see the real objects. Then they realize their error.

But there's more. Plato suggests that the light of the bright fire is uncomfortable, and released prisoners would prefer to return to the world of shadows. But Plato says, suppose someone caused a prisoner not only to see the fire and the puppets, but also took the prisoner gradually and forcibly up out of the cave and into the sunlight. [Slide 2] The prisoner would see more and more natural light. Finally the prisoner would see true reality, the true form of light. The light and shadows, Plato would say, were a shadow form of reality, related to, but less than the true reality of the sunlight.

Jesus's allegory works somewhat differently. Plato's sunlight is a better form of the shadow light. Jesus doesn't mean that living bread and living water are better forms of earthly food and water, especially pure and wonderful. Nor does he mean, of course, that once we discover living bread and water we will never have to eat or drink again.

What Jesus is talking about is the story within the story, or the allegory within the allegory. Jesus really wants to talk about signs and miracles. And here he is not far from Plato's cave. Jesus performed signs, but ultimately they were unsatisfying. They were shadows of the spiritual reality he was talking about. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that there was a spiritual reality (he used living bread and water as a metaphor for it) that would never leave them unsatisfied. He said of himself that he was that reality. And here again, he meant something

similar to Plato. If we saw the earthly Jesus as all that he meant or if we saw his miracles as all that he meant, we would be settling for a shadow version of his meaning.

In a few moments we will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion together. We will hear, "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you. Take, drink, this is the blood of the new covenant given for you." These are not, of course, the words of some form of cannibalistic rite. It is an acknowledgement, it is a spiritual claim that in the risen Christ we have living bread and drink that can quench all spiritual hunger and thirst.

I suppose we repeat this ceremony every month simply because none of us has come fully into the sunlight of the spiritual reality God intends for us. Our spiritual hunger and thirst persist. Communion reminds us of the incredible reality that Jesus invites us into, into a reality we only glimpse, a reality where our spiritual thirsts and hungers will finally be satisfied.

In Plato's allegory of the cave, he says that the prisoners would balk every step of the way as they were dragged into the sunlight. They would be blinded by the brightness and fearful. It would take time, and it would take an insistent guide to move them forward. Perhaps Jesus is a bit more gentle, but he equally understands how disorienting it is for us to open to bright light of spiritual truth. And so he gave us scripture, church communities, ceremonies like communion and most of all himself to guide and accompany us. Take eat, this is my body broken for you. Take, drink, this is the blood of the new covenant given for you. Amen.