

Background Music

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

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The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand 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." John 6:24-35

Background music is everywhere. We may hear it in the dentist's office, on the phone when we are placed on hold, in airports and restaurants, even in the grocery store. Usually we never notice it, until we hear a song we know. Then suddenly, it grabs our attention. When I am shopping somewhere and hear a song I know, I usually start singing along, sometimes even moving to the beat if I really love it. This was always highly entertaining for my kids when they were three, and highly embarrassing for them when they were thirteen!

In the Gospel of John there is a lot of background music. Many of the things that happen, and things that Jesus says are like background music – they echo the words and actions of Hebrew prophets, and the stories of the children of Israel. Sometimes the people recognize this background music they have heard all their lives. But not always.

Last week when Jesus had everyone sit down and miraculously fed them bread and fish, there was some background music. The people noticed that this was a lot like the time when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness with nothing to eat, and manna and quail suddenly appeared out of nowhere! I'm not sure they realized that Moses had begged God to do something because the people were hangry! It was this background music that made them think that Jesus was indeed the prophet come into the world to save them, and they wanted to take him by force and make him king. But Jesus made a fast getaway.

This week the story continues the next day as the people are looking for Jesus. Only they were not just looking, they were chasing him across the sea of Galilee. When they finally tracked him down, they interrogated Jesus. When did you come here? How did you get here? They knew Jesus had power and authority, power and authority that they wanted, and they were not going to let him go. With Jesus, they could have all the bread they wanted, they could have wealth and land and freedom from Roman oppression.

But Jesus, who in John's gospel knows everything, said to them, "You want more loaves, you want control, you want power, you want nonstop miracles. But what I did yesterday on the hillside, multiplying the loaves, was more than a miracle. It was a sign; a sign pointing to something greater than any miracle. It's in the signs that you will find me, see me, learn from me, and share in me. Jesus wants them to understand that there are two kinds of food; the kind that perishes and the kind that endures. Jesus wants them to comprehend that there is more to life than eating and drinking, more than acquiring material goods and winning at all costs. But the people missed the sign, they missed the point.

Okay then, they say, what must we do to perform the works of God so that we can make bread out of nothing? Jesus should be pretty exasperated by now, but he is patient. “Believing is your work to do,” he tells them, “Believe in the one whom God has sent.” But they still cannot see the sign standing in front of them, speaking to them, and they ask, “What sign are you going to give us so that we may believe you? What work are you doing? Because if you are truly a prophet then you would be doing things like Moses did, you know, feeding us manna in the wilderness, parting the Red Sea, and things like that.”

I imagine Jesus looking up to heaven and rolling his eyes at this point. And then Jesus says, “It was not Moses but God who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.” Sadly, even with the background music playing, with thoughts of Moses and God’s mighty saving acts on their minds, they were still focusing on perishable food. They still wanted miracles on demand.

We like to think that we are wiser now than people were in biblical times. We follow Jesus, we come to church, we hear the scriptures, and come to the communion table for bread from heaven. We are sure that we can hear the background music and connect the teachings of Jesus to what is going on in the world around us.

But sometimes it’s not easy to know the difference between what is perishable and what is enduring and eternal. Sometimes we don’t notice the background music. Sometimes we cannot see the sign when it is standing right in front of us, because it is nothing like the sign we were expecting. We are captivated by our own desires and goals and miss the kingdom goal. We are seeking our own happiness and are not too concerned if it affects the happiness or well-being of someone else. The world is filled with distractions that prevent us from seeing the signs God sends to us all the time.

As people of faith we are called to gather in worship, to pray, and to study the scriptures. This is how we learn the background music, where we find nourishment that fills our being with the strength and love of God. Next week Jesus is going to flesh this out even more for us.

The children of Israel complained their way through the wilderness for forty years, and yet, God sustained them, fed them, and loved them. The people following Jesus were not willing to put down their own wants and desires for perishable things, so that their hands could receive the bread of life, the promise of eternal food. And yet Jesus loved them.

When we find ourselves forgetting what God has promised, chasing after the things of this world, messing up, feeling lost and hungry, and always wanting more than we have, maybe it’s time to turn up the volume on the background music, to remember our salvation history, and to feast on the food that endures for eternal life. Amen.