

“Fear, Food and Faith”

John 6:16-29

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16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” 21 Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

22 On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. 23 Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” 28 Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” – John 6:16-29, ESV

Introduction: “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”

Life can be full of disappointments and dashed hopes. There’s a good reason why one of U2’s biggest hits remains one of their most popular signature songs: “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” The theme of that great song is an echo of the theme of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon tried pleasure, wisdom, folly and wealth in his pursuit to find meaning in life “under the sun.” In the end, he had to conclude that it was all meaningless and empty. Literally, life in this world apart from God is a breath, a vapor, something without substance that quickly dissipates.

Often, the disappointments we face in life come because we set our sights too low and expect too much from things incapable of delivering the results we seek. We think our lives will be changed by a vacation to Disney World. Do we really think that the needs of our souls can be satisfied at so cheap a price?

It takes time to re-train our hearts and minds. We need to come to really see and believe that the fleeting pleasures of this world, as nice as they are in their proper place, are ill-suited to the deepest satisfaction of our souls. But more importantly, we also need to come to see and truly believe that only Jesus can satisfy our deepest hunger, our most profound longings. In today’s passage, we see Jesus giving His disciples a glimpse of His greatness and giving the crowds a rebuke for their shallow desires. Then, He calls them both to what they truly need, to believe in Him.

A. The Disciples See Jesus & Are Afraid, vv. 16-21

FEAR: *“It is I; do not be afraid.”*

Jesus has just miraculously fed 5,000 men, plus women and children, with five loaves of bread and two small fish. The crowd reacted by trying to take Jesus by force and make Him king. Who wouldn't want a king who could provide them with all the food they could eat for free every day? Such a campaign platform would still get anyone elected today. Jesus wasn't interested in such a petty office. This is one of our indications that the aims of the crowd are much, much lower than that of our Savior.

Jesus left the crowds and went up the mountain to pray alone. Matthew's account tells us He sent the disciples away, which explains why they left without Him. While Jesus is up on the mountain praying, the disciples are struggling in the boat. A very strong headwind had suddenly swept down from the mountains to the north of the sea and the boat was stuck. Matthew's account also tells us that it was the fourth watch of the night, between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., when Jesus came to the disciples on the water. They had rowed most of the night and had only travelled around 3 or 4 miles.

We need to appreciate how exhausting and difficult this struggle was for these men. Yes, they were experienced fishermen and had dealt with headwinds before, but this was something beyond their strength. Several years ago, we were in San Francisco, having lunch at the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company on Pier 39. Outside the window, we noticed a kayaker. The afternoon tide was very strong and this kayaker was paddling with all his might just to maintain his position in the water. Whenever he rested for just a few seconds, he was quickly pulled backward. I have since learned that kayakers apparently enjoy this, considering it a rite of passage for serious kayakers.

Have you ever known that kind of deep struggle in your life, where it seems to take everything you have just to stay in place?

Here's a picture for us to keep in our minds: When we're rowing hard and making no progress, straining against the oars and the waves and the wind and getting nowhere, Jesus is praying for us. He is interceding, and He will send us the help we need when we need it.

Jesus remained on the mountain for most of the night, praying, while His disciples were straining. Why? Why wouldn't He come sooner? Well, these men were experienced fishermen, comfortable on the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps He was intentionally letting them come to the end of their own resources and exhaust their own strength before coming to them. We know He was showing them more of Himself.

It is when Jesus comes walking on the water in the middle of the raging sea that the disciples are frightened. This time, it is not the wind and waves which terrify them, but it is Jesus, walking calmly on the water, striding majestically across the raging sea. This is another picture we need to keep in our minds. The wind and waves may be overwhelming to us, but Jesus is undisturbed. Jesus walks calmly across that which we cannot overcome with all our might.

The disciples are right to be afraid. It's only natural. But Jesus speaks profound and powerful words to them. He says, "It is I; Stop being afraid." When he says, "It is I," He literally says, "I AM." In John's Gospel, whenever Jesus says "I AM," we need to pay attention.

Jesus supernaturally crossing the sea and announcing “I AM” brings in more echoes from the Exodus. We mentioned several of them last week and more are coming: Like Moses, Jesus led a large crowd of people into the wilderness, He went up on a mountain and He supernaturally provided food for the people to eat in the wilderness. Now, He sends His disciples across the Sea of Galilee so He can cross supernaturally and also bring them across supernaturally: *“Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”*

Jesus’ words, “I am. Stop being afraid,” make a clear distinction between Him and Moses. While Moses led the people of God through the Red Sea and through wilderness, and while Moses was used by God to supernaturally feed the people, it was God who said to Moses, “I AM” when He called Moses to lead His people. Here Jesus announces “I AM” to His disciples.

It’s not clear that the disciples understood the significance of Jesus’ statement, because it would be valid and perfectly normal for them to have understood Jesus the way the ESV translates this, “It is I,” a fairly common way of self-identifying. Still, Jesus is showing them that He is not just another Moses, but someone who is far greater than Moses. God parted the Red Sea so Moses could lead the people of Israel across on dry land. Jesus didn’t need to have the sea parted, because He could walk on top of the waves. In Matthew’s account, He even helps Peter to walk on top of the waves ever-so-briefly, until Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink.

We all face difficult challenges in life. Are we remembering that Jesus is praying for us as we’re rowing against the head winds? Are we believing in Him such that we are more in awe of Him and His power than we are of the trials and challenges we are facing? Have we heard His voice say to our souls, “I am. Stop being afraid.”? Have we welcomed Him into the boat with us?

B. The Crowd Seeks Jesus & Is Rebuked, vv. 22-27

FOOD: *“Do not work for the food that perishes”*

As Jesus and the disciples step ashore, John catches us up on what’s been happening with the crowd. The crowd noticed that only one boat left the shore on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and they also noticed that Jesus was not in that boat. So, naturally, they were looking for Jesus. Also, just as naturally, boatmen from Galilee heard there was a great crowd of people on the other side of the sea, and so they rowed and sailed across, hoping to pick up some passengers. Like New York City cab drivers circling Yankee Stadium after an Orioles win, these experienced boatmen ready themselves for a fare.

Once the crowd realizes that Jesus is not in the area anymore, they don’t seem to stop and ask how He could have slipped past them in the night. Instead, they simply get in the waiting boats and cross back. Jesus and the disciples have gone back to Capernaum, and they’re heading to the synagogue, where Jesus will deliver the long discourse from verses 35-58. Whether this initial exchange with the people takes place in the synagogue as they are preparing for worship or outside as they are making their way into the synagogue is unclear, but this dialogue in verses 25-34 seems to take place before Jesus’ main address and discussion with the Jewish leaders in verses 35-58, which we will look at next week and the following week.

Right now, though, Jesus responds to the question of the pursuing crowd, “Rabbi, how did you get here?” by calling out their motives in seeking Him. He’s not going to explain Himself to them, and give them even more cause to want to make Him king. Instead, He is going to expose their heart motivations and call them to what they really need to know and believe about Him.

So He says to them, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking 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 to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”*

What does Jesus mean when He says, “You are seeking me, not because you saw signs”? He means that they are not coming to Him as the promised Messiah, believing in Him with true faith, in response to the clear evidence they have seen and tasted for themselves. Rather, they’re coming to Him simply because they got a free meal and they want another.

We are so easily appeased and so simple-minded in our desires, aren’t we? We get some amazing blessing from God, and instead of thanking Him and seeing His wonderful power and fatherly care at work in the provision of our need, we just want more. And we get frustrated if we don’t immediately get what we want, which is exactly what’s going to happen to this crowd.

So Jesus urges them: *“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”* Instead of waiting for the next free handout from Jesus, the crowd needed to understand the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 as God’s seal to attest to Jesus as the Son of Man, the eternal king God has promised to His people. Jesus has so much more to offer the crowd than a free lunch. He alone can give them food that does not perish, food that endures to eternal life. This food will be the focus of Jesus’ discourse, as he announces to the crowd that He Himself is the Bread of Life.

C. The People Ask Jesus & He Answers, vv. 28-29

FAITH: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”*

The crowd actually seems to respond well to Jesus’ rebuke. They ask Him, *“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”* But even this response, which seems so earnest and sincere and even wise. If actually mis-guided. They think they will need to do something to earn the food that endures to eternal life. This is reasonable, especially since Jesus has just told them, *“Don’t work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.”*

The crowd was mis-guided not because they wanted to do the will of God, but because they were seeking a task list they could complete in order to earn eternal life. Religion makes people expert rule-followers and task-doers. So they’re saying, “Okay, Jesus, we realize that eternal life is much more important than a free lunch” – and that’s where they’re moving in the right direction – “so tell us what we need to do to get it.”

In essence, the question of the crowd was the same as the rich young ruler, who asked Jesus “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response to his question, Jesus pointed to the law and reminded the young man of what the law required, essentially requiring moral perfection. When the young man arrogantly responded that he had kept all of God’s commands since he was a boy, Jesus exposed to the

sinful state of his heart by telling him to sell all he had and give it to the poor, then to come and follow Jesus. The rich young ruler went away sad, because he loved his money more than God.

Here Jesus gives a much more direct answer to the question: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”* He tells them very plainly that the only work God requires is not a work at all, but faith. As a way to attain eternal life, faith is the anti-work. Faith is receiving and resting on Christ alone for salvation. Works look to yourself, to your own obedience, your own performance. Faith looks to Jesus, to His obedience and His pleasing of His Father in everything. Works done to attain eternal life are a quest to establish your own righteousness before a Holy God, but faith is an abandonment if such a futile endeavor and a complete turning from yourself to Christ.

As we make our way through the rest of the chapter over the next few weeks, we need to make sure we hold onto verse 29. The central issue is the question of faith. The answer to the disciples’ struggle and fear and the answer to the crowds quest for food is answered in the same way: Believe in Jesus, the One Whom God has sent. He is the Bread of Life to satisfy. He is the Savior to rescue and redeem. He is the One who will bring us to God, give us eternal life, and raise us up on the last day.

Conclusion: What Are You Looking For?

So, where are you this morning? Are you struggling with something that feels impossible, like rowing all night against a head wind, exhausted and making no progress? Or are you chasing after the American dream, working hard to climb the ladder of success? What happens when we get to the top of the ladder and realize it was leaning against the wrong wall?

To those pulling hard at the oars in the middle of an impossible head wind, Jesus says, “I am. Stop being afraid.” What is impossible for us is easy for Jesus. He is not ruffled by the wind and waves. If we fear Him and gladly bring Him into the boat, His presence can bring us peace and His power will carry us through whatever we’re facing.

To those working hard for the bread that perishes, Jesus says, “Stop. I have bread that endured to eternal life.” Jesus Himself will give us this bread, the Bread of Life, which is His gift of Himself for our salvation.

For those furiously working hard to do the works of God and earn eternal life, Jesus says, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”* Quit trying to earn what Jesus gives for free. How can we possibly hope to earn what only the life and death of the Son of God could purchase for us? How could we possibly hope to deserve what Jesus alone could ever earn and what He gives to us for free, when we trust in Him.

In the end, no matter where you are – in the storm, climbing the ladder of success, running the marathon of religious duty – the answer is the same: Look to Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Receive and rest upon Jesus. God has sent Him to us to be our Savior. We must stop looking elsewhere for salvation and look to Him alone!