

“Bread Christians”
John 6:24-35, Ephesians 4:1-16
August 5, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

In the nineteenth century many western Christian churches reached out to Africa and Asia in a great missionary movement. The results are still evident all around us. Today the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world is in Korea. And there are twice as many Presbyterians in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa than there are in the Presbyterian Church (USA). One of the areas of course that many Christian churches sent missionaries to was China. But China at that time was a very poor country. And there was a name in nineteenth century China, and other places in Asia, for persons who came to church because they were hungry. One of the things that the missionary churches did was to feed the people, to provide for their physical needs as well as their spiritual ones. And there were some people who converted, were baptized, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their prospects improved and they and their families no longer needed rice, they drifted away from the church. Hence the missionaries called them “rice Christians.” But we would be wrong if we thought this only happened in the third world. That name also calls to mind those who flocked to the churches in East Germany and Romania just before the liberation of eastern Europe from Soviet domination—when the church was in the forefront of demonstrations, manifesting courage, pastors were speaking out against the Communist regimes. People came to be a part of it, to cheer the church on, to join the congregation in its opposition to the tyrannical state. But after liberation from the Soviet Union and from local dictators, the crowds dwindled and the churches began to look as straggling and abandoned as they had before. And we'd be mistaken if we think that the American church was much different. In the 1950s and 60s the memberships of American Protestant churches boomed. As the Baby Boom increased, so did the churches. But why? Did more people come to church because America was becoming a more spiritual, more religiously obedient nation? Or did people come for other reasons? Did a businessman come

because he could make connections over coffee? Did families come with their kids so that they could get help with raising them, going to summer camps, involved in something outside the house? Did people come to church for what they could get out of it? Is it any different today? It wasn't any different in Jesus' time.

The crowds that followed Jesus to Capernaum to find him after he had fed the 5000 in the wilderness were just like people have always been. They see church and faith instrumentally, as something they can choose for themselves to use for their own needs or to pursue their own interests. They were “bread Christians” instead of rice Christians. They saw the miracle of the bread and the fish as an end in itself. Give us this bread always that we may never be hungry. But Jesus intends the bread to be a sign, something that points them to faith in God and in the Son whom he has sent.

Why do we come to church? What do we get out of it? Do we come because we are going to be entertained for an hour or so, by a diverting sermon and by excellent music? So maybe if we did a podcast and broadcast the service on the internet, we could get the same thing in our pajamas over Sunday morning coffee. Surely we come for more reasons than to be entertained. Maybe we come because it is tradition. Our parents and grandparents went to church and impressed upon us that it is something that you are supposed to do. It's continuity with previous generations. Is that a reason to be here? Or maybe it is helping you with a moral foundation for your children. It is true that having other significant adults in a child's life, not just the parents, is an important building block in the faith formation of young people. Maybe you come because you have a burden that church helps you handle. Maybe you have grief or anger or guilt that you find hard to bear, and being part of a church community means that you have others to help you get through the week. Maybe you come because you find that church is a way to be helpful and to change things that need changing in our world. Church can be a way to feed the hungry and work for justice and help in times of disaster.

You know, none of those are bad reasons for coming to church. And I suspect that we all have some of those motivations. But I don't know that we are all that different than the people who came up to Jesus

asking for bread. Bread is a good thing, a necessary thing. But is it all there is?

Benjamin Sparks, retired pastor and scholar from Richmond says:

Too often, we forget how to pursue what really matters. We are accustomed to inviting people into the community of faith for all the wrong reasons: for the “right” kind of worship, for political engagement on behalf of the poor and downtrodden; for the sake of a Christian America; for a strong youth and family ministry; for the opportunity to practice mission in a downtown location, or to go on mission trips to Africa or Central America. Yet what we have to offer—in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ—first and foremost is “soul food,” which lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world.

Soul food. That's the food that we will still desire and still rejoice in having, long after all people are fed and justice fills the earth. We will still need the food for our souls. The food that this bread is a symbol of. Christ himself. Because really, faith is not about what Christ or the church can do for us, it is about what Christ can make of us. Chris read for us this morning from Ephesians, about “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. . . . speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.”

We are here, ultimately, to grow up. To become like Christ. To grow into the people that God intended us to be. Jesus discourages those who come to him from being bread Christians. Followers who come to have their physical needs met. We come to partake of this bread. Not to feed our bodies, but to partake in Christ himself. All that we do here, entertaining or not, is to share Christ with one another. We open our building to be welcoming in the name of Christ. All that we do outside these walls, whether it is through bread or food or backpacks or water, is because we want to share Christ with the world. Christ doesn't just want to fill our stomachs, he wants to fill our spirits. He wants to make us new.