

Exodus 16:1-12

John 6:22-40

August 2, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD'S WORK, GOD'S BREAD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For only \$39.95, you can enjoy the 5 pound Mt. Nacheesmo at Tio's Mexican Grill in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mt. Nacheesmo is five pounds of nachos covered with the following ingredients: beef, chicken, beans, cheddar and jack cheeses, tomatoes, green peppers, black olives, lettuce, onions, sour cream, and guacamole. That's probably enough food for ten people.

However, if you want your picture to hang on Tio's "Wall of Fame," all you have to do is eat a Mt. Nacheesmo BY YOURSELF in less than forty-five minutes. If you accept the challenge but fail to finish the mountain of nachos, your picture is put on Tio's "Wall of Shame." With a bunch of University of Michigan students cheering him on, Adam Richman accepted and completed the Mt. Nacheesmo challenge. He hosts the somewhat strange but intriguing TV show called "Man Vs. Food." Mt. Nacheesmo is just one of the ridiculously large food challenges Adam has accepted and completed.

Then there is Matt Stonie, who brought Joey Chestnut's eight-year reign as the hot dog eating champ to an end this past 4th of July by eating sixty-two hot dogs in ten minutes at the Coney Island Hot Dog Eating Contest. Joey Chestnut ate sixty hot dogs in the same amount of time. When he was asked how he felt about losing the championship, Joey commended his opponent and said it was good to have the competition. "He makes me hungry!"

Think about the last time you ate a really large meal. Maybe it was Thanksgiving dinner or a church covered dish luncheon or a family reunion picnic or a pig-pickin' with all the sides and trimmings. Think about eating until you're completely satisfied (or even more), pushing back from the table, and saying something like, "I'm so full I won't be able to eat again for a week!" But there you are a few hours later, pulling your chair up to the table again, eating leftovers or a completely new meal. Even after eating a five pound Mt. Nacheesmo or sixty-two hot dogs in ten minutes, Adam Richman and Joey Chestnut and Matt Stonie eventually got hungry again.

One day, Jesus fed a crowd of 5000+ people with five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus "took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted . . . and they were satisfied." (John 6:11-12) Twelve hours later, the people who had eaten as much as they wanted until they were satisfied went looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, Jesus said to them point-blank, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

It was breakfast time! The people were hungry — again! Even though they had eaten as much as they wanted the night before, they were hungry again. So, they went straight to the source of the bread, only to get more than they bargained for — much as Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well and man born blind who received his sight and Lazarus’ sister, Martha, received more than they ever expected or imagined.

“Scripture interpreting Scripture” is a bedrock Presbyterian, Reformed principle of reading and studying and hearing God’s Word. In that spirit, listen to something else Jesus said about bread and work and daily life, this time from his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-33)

Jesus said to the crowd looking for breakfast on the morning after, “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.” Now there’s something we can all relate to — working for food that perishes. Surely it’s no coincidence that we talk about someone being the main “breadwinner” in the family. We call the money we earn “bread” or “dough.” So, we work hard to earn the bread we need to buy the bread we need. We eat the bread we’ve bought with the bread we’ve earned, but we always get hungry again.

The people there by the side of the sea that morning were looking for real bread to fill their stomachs. Jesus took the idea of bread and ran with it to talk about quality and meaning and purpose in life. Even if we edit Jesus’ words and make them more generic, they still pack a punch: “Do not work for the things that perish, but for the things that endure for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” In 1902, John D. Rockefeller was worth about \$200 million, an amount that eventually grew to \$900 million. When he died in 1937, his fortune was estimated to be \$1.4 billion. When he was asked once, “How much money is enough money?” he replied, “Just a little bit more.”

That seems to be the gist of Jesus’ words about God’s work and God’s bread. When we work for the food that perishes, just a little bit more always seems to be the goal. If I just had a little bit more _____, then I could _____. Fill in the first

blank with almost any “thing” and you catch the drift of this conversation Jesus had with the people who had come for breakfast.

Our “daily bread” is certainly very important. Jesus even taught us to ask God for that very thing when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” But it’s worth noting that we are asking **God** to give us what we need. We are not relying on our own strength and abilities. The people by the sea the next morning brought up their ancestors eating the manna in the wilderness. Remember what Dottie read from the Exodus story: “The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your will of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

Near the end of his life, Moses himself reminded the Israelites of their manna experience in the desert wilderness. He preached words that remind us of Jesus’ message about “the food that endures for eternal life” — “[The Lord your God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 8:3) That’s where today’s Prayer for Illumination comes from. It reminds us there’s more to life than working for the things that perish.

So, what are we supposed to do? That’s exactly what those people by the sea asked Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” The answer is the same for us as it was for those folks 2000 years ago who were looking for “just a little bit more” — “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” We don’t know if Jesus fed breakfast to that crowd by the sea that morning. Maybe he did. After all, he had compassion on them the night before because they were in a lonely place with nothing to eat. Their situation hadn’t changed much overnight.

Whether or not he fed them again, Jesus used the opportunity to talk about life priorities. When your stomach is rumbling, that focuses your attention on finding something to eat so you can have the energy you need to do the work you need to do and to be satisfied. In light of that physical reality, think about what it means for you and me when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” The bread of life gives us the spiritual energy, the grace and salvation, the strength we need to do God’s work and to be satisfied. When we eat as much as we want of the bread of life, we will be satisfied.

We know what happens to our physical bodies and lives if we don’t get enough to eat. Why would we think it would be any different for our lives of faith? If we are not nourished on the food that endures for eternal life, we will find it very hard to do God’s work, even believing in the one whom God has sent.

There’s something sacramental about the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. We hear it in the language of the story itself, “He took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.” But we also hear it in the connection Jesus makes between God’s work and God’s bread — “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent . . . For the bread

of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world . . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

When you eat lunch today, take a minute to thank God for the food you enjoy. Also, thank God for the food that endures for eternal life, for the bread of life. Thank God for the sustenance and strength and life God’s food gives you to do God’s work.

In March of this year, Dr. Fred Craddock died. He was described as “like no other preacher you have ever heard.” He was a great storyteller. As I was reading for today’s sermon, I came across this story he told about a memorable meal. As you listen to Dr. Craddock’s story, think about God’s grace and goodness in your life and how God offers us what we need to do God’s work in the world.

Dr. Craddock had been invited to give two lectures at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, in mid-October. As he left the lecture hall on Friday afternoon, it was beginning to spit a little snow. Craddock said: “I was surprised, and my host was surprised because he had written, ‘It’s too early for cold weather, but you might bring a little windbreaker, a light jacket.’” “The next morning when I got up,” Craddock says, two or three feet of snow pressed against the door. The phone rang, and my host said, “We’re all surprised by this. In fact, I can’t come get you to take you to breakfast, the lecture this morning has been canceled, and the airport is closed. If you can make your way down the block and around the corner, there is a little depot, a bus depot, and it has a café. I’m sorry.” I said, “I’ll get around.” I put on that little light jacket; it was nothing. I got my little cap and put it on; it didn’t even help me in the room. I went into the bathroom and unrolled long sheets of toilet paper and made a nest in my cap so that it would protect my head against that icy wind.

I went outside, shivering. The wind was cold, the snow was deep. I slid and bumped and finally made it around the corner into the bus station. Every stranded traveler in Western Canada was there, strangers to each other and to me, pressing and pushing and loud. I finally found place to sit, and after a lengthy time a man in a greasy apron came over and said, “What’ll you have?” I said, “May I see a menu?” He said, “What you want a menu for? We have soup.” I said, “What kinds of soup do you have?” And he said, “Soup. You want some soup?” I said, “That was what I was going to order — soup.” He brought the soup, and I put the spoon to it — Yuck! It was awful. It was kind of gray looking; it was so bad I couldn’t eat it, but I sat there and put my hands around it. It was warm, and so I sat there with my head down, my head wrapped in toilet paper, bemoaning and beweeeping my outcast state with the horrible soup. But it was warm, so I clutched it and stayed bent over my soup stove.

The door opened again. The wind was icy, and somebody yelled, “Close the door!” In came this woman clutching her little coat. She found a place, not far from me. The greasy apron came, “What you want?” She said, “Glass of water.” He brought a glass water, took out his tablet, and said, “Now what’ll you have?” She said, “Just the water.” He said, “You have to order, lady.” “Well, I just want a glass of water.” “Look, I have customers that pay — what you think this is, a church or something? Now

what do you want?” She said, “Just a glass of water and some time to get warm.” “Look, there are people that are paying here. If you’re not going to order, you’ve got to leave!” And he got real loud about it. So she got up to leave and, almost as if rehearsed, everybody in that little café stood up and started toward the door. I got up and said, “I’m voting for something here; but I don’t know what it is.” And the man in the greasy apron said, “All right, all right, all right, she can stay.” Everybody sat down, and he brought her a bowl of soup.

I said to the person sitting there by me, I said, “Who is she?” He said, “I never saw her before.” The place grew quiet, but I heard the sipping of that awful soup. I said, “I’m going to try that again.” I put my spoon to the soup — you know, it was not bad soup. Everybody was eating this soup. I started eating the soup, and it was pretty good soup. I have no idea what kind of soup it was. I don’t know what was in it, but I do recall when I was eating it, it tasted a little bit like bread and wine. Just a little like bread and wine.¹

Let us pray: Holy God, we thank you, we praise you, we glorify you, for you have fed us with your Word and filled us with your Spirit. Send us out to show and tell the love of Jesus Christ to a hungry, thirsty world; in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F Ward, pages 83-84.