

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, Co-Pastor

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18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 6:24-35

The Economics of Jesus

It doesn't take a genius to recognize that Jesus has a lot to say to the concern that's been on the minds of most Americans since last September—the economy.

Since September our daily news has been dominated by financial reports—bailouts, bankruptcies, the stock market, unemployment statistics, foreclosures, new housing starts, bundled mortgages, recession, financial crisis, credit crunch—words which used to be at the back of the newspaper have moved to the front page, from the end of the news report to the headlines. The news has created an atmosphere of anxiety and fear. Will things get worse before they get better? Will “better” be as good as things seemed to be before? And how's it going to affect me, and my children and grandchildren?

It doesn't take a genius to recognize that Jesus has a lot to say to our economic concerns—but it does take some careful listening, and sensitive thinking—and a measure of humility—to hear what he has to say and begin to follow his way.

Economic worries are as old as creation. Life depends on having sufficient resources—water, nutrients, the right environmental conditions—and protection from predation. All creatures on earth spend their lives pursuing resources and avoiding being eaten. That's life, right? Humans just make that life occupation more complex, and we add the dimension of worrying about it, too.

So the questions of the folks in our story today who followed Jesus across the lake after seeing him feed 5000 people are no surprise. Jesus knew their motivation, and he named it. They were looking for more free lunches. If this is what Jesus could do, then they wanted it. After all, we are all economic beings. We are flesh, and we need to eat.

But listen to what Jesus says to those who come looking for more bread from the miracle worker. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

I think these particular seekers who came after Jesus were the predecessors of today's adherents to the “prosperity gospel.” Do you know this popular theology? It's also known as “health and wealth,” or “name it and claim it.” It blends a few Bible verses with the “power of positive thinking” and mixes in a dose of American entitlement. Some of its promoters have become quite materially successful themselves. Three years ago, *TIME* magazine surveyed the American people for a cover story and found that 61% said yes, they believe that God wants them to be prosperous. (*TIME*, 9/10/06) The story reported that three of the four biggest megachurches in the country teach that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke, and that if you can establish through word and deed that you are “in Jesus Christ,” then God will respond with gifts of health and wealth. God will give you your own house, a job promotion, whatever it is you desire. You can have “your best life now.”

It's been a popular theme in American preaching for a long time. It stems from the same desires as motivated those followers who came across the lake to find out how to get more bread from Jesus. I don't know how well these churches are faring in this time of

foreclosures and lost jobs and economic hardship for many. But I hear Jesus repudiating the idea that his purpose is to give us what we want. He says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” That’s the same message he gave the tempter in the wilderness who challenged him to change stones into loaves, when he quoted the scriptures which say, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mt 4:4) And he said it one more time when he preached to the crowd on the mountain, “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?” (Mt 6:25)

Michael Lindvall is pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in Manhattan.(the one in New York City) He has many people in his congregation who work in financial services, who live in expensive apartments and who were riding pretty high prior to last fall’s economic collapse. Lindvall writes about the effect of the financial crisis, as seen in his church.

When members of my congregation reflect on these events, they often remark that they have been “clarifying.” They are suggesting that this experience of economic dislocation, for all its pain, will make it clearer to us what matters most in life. They mention faith, family and friendships, and not money, power or professional prestige. *(The Christian Century, 7/28/09, p. 26)*

Jesus’ first word to today’s economic concerns is one of perspective, of keeping in mind what’s most important. Life is about much more than material gain. You knew that, didn’t you? So do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.

Now does this mean that Jesus’ message all about an other-world, life beyond this one, wait for your pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by? I don’t think so. God is not a sugar daddy ready to give endless sweet things to those who profess the proper creed, a celestial ATM who showers material blessings on believers, but that doesn’t mean that God is unconcerned for our physical well-being. And Jesus, God’s messenger and representative and embodiment, shows us God’s concern. When 5000 people gathered to hear Jesus speak and forgot to bring their lunch, God provided. The line of questioning of the seekers leads them to recall the manna in the wilderness when the Hebrew people were wandering with Moses. Jesus, they ask, aren’t you going to be like Moses and give us bread from heaven?

Ah, says Jesus, let me refresh your memory of that story. Yes, the people were hungry, and yes, Moses told them what to do to satisfy their hunger. But the bread came from God, not from Moses. And that is because it is God’s nature to provide for humans, to care for us. But you seem to be forgetting an important part of the story, and that is the lesson on greed. Don’t you remember that some of our ancestors didn’t trust that there would be enough bread for the next day, and they collected more than their share? Don’t you remember that their excess rotted and grew worms and stank? God provides for our need, but not for our greed!

It is NOT God’s desire that some have too much and many have too little. Human greed or inattention or self-deception can thwart God’s desire that all have what they need. Now, I can report that we have made progress on global hunger in recent years. In the

1970s, one out of four people in the world were undernourished—25%. Today it is one out of six—17%. (Bread for the World, Background Paper, June 2009) But we're not there yet, and ending hunger will take dedicated long-term commitment from governments, organizations, and individuals. It will take the best minds and the purest motives working together, when we recognize that we are all one human community. In our community, we are coming together to share the resources we have—our gifts to the Food Bank are one symbol of that sharing. Family Promise is another way our community works together—we had 4 families call our church building home this past week. The lesson of the manna in the wilderness and the feeding of the 5000 is the same—God provides for us through human community. Community is God's desire—community is where we learn to share the gifts of the earth and the blessings of heaven. Lindvall relates how community is happening in these hard times in his church in Manhattan:

I have heard tales of executives refusing bonuses that had been promised to them so that no one in their office would need to be laid off. I have watched as church members quietly passed the hat to assist a member who was facing serious financial problems. I have seen neighbors take in neighbors who were evicted from their apartment after losing a job. One member of my congregation made an extraordinarily generous pledge to the church to help us through this period. He said, "It's easy to give when times are good; it's more important to give when times are tough."
(The Christian Century, 7/28/09, p. 26)

Blessings on them. Blessings on this congregation, where similar stories could be told. And blessings on those seekers who, when Jesus reminded them that the bread of God comes down from heaven gives to life to the world, responded with "Sir, give us this bread, always!"

They echo the woman at the well, who wanted eternal, life-giving water. And they speak for us when we are in touch with our deepest longings for our truest needs. We don't want to be shallow, or stingy or always worried about material things. We want to be in community with one another and in communion with God. We don't want to be addicted by our cravings for more wealth, more things, more shopping. We want to be filled with the goodness of life, overflowing with love, sharing from the abundance of God, engaged in good work. We don't want our identity to be as consumers—we want to be the people of God, created in God's image. Sir, give us the life-giving bread which comes down from heaven!!

And so he finally reveals the truth we've been waiting for. I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE, says Jesus. If you come to me, you'll never again have that empty feeling in your soul. Jesus Christ fills us with God's goodness, God's mercy, God's eternal blessing. It's his third economic principle—he is the spiritual food which endures for eternal life, which far surpasses all our material pursuits.

And he is here for us to enjoy now. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are not just convenient representations of our faith. They are powerful symbols that God gives us what we need for life, that God cares for our physical well-being, and that God provides us eternal spiritual food. They are simple, basic, and drawn from our everyday experience to remind us that just as we need food for life, we need spiritual food for spiritual life. The bread is broken, as Christ's body was broken for us. The wine is poured out, as Christ's blood was shed in sacrifice for our eternal life. The meal is shared in community, as God

provided for the Hebrew people in the wilderness and as Jesus showed his disciples how to share with 5000 others. There is enough for all, this lesson in economics teaches us. At this table, the bread of life is prepared for all who ask of Jesus, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Here I am, says Jesus. Taste and see. Take, and eat.