

Hungry for more: Sunday, August 6

*Exodus 16:2-4,9-15; John 6:24-35*

by [H. Stephen Shoemaker](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

As Jesus speaks and acts in John's Gospel, the people hear him at one level while he seeks to move them to a deeper level. When Jesus feeds the 5,000, for example, the crowd, stomachs filled, rushes to make him king. Jesus flees. God wants the hungry fed, but there is a deeper hunger and a better bread.

The crowd pursues and finds him on the other side of the sea in Capernaum. They do not know he has crossed it without a boat (his own Red Sea crossing?), and they ask, "Rabbi, when (and how?) did you get here?" Jesus brushes aside the question and addresses the issue at hand: Amen, Amen (Truly, Truly), I say to you, you are looking for me not because you understand the meaning of the sign but because you got your fill of bread and want some more. Do not labor for the bread that spoils but for the bread that endures to eternal life.

The crowd, not wanting signs but the gaudy miracles themselves, asks for more of them and reminds Jesus about Moses's manna miracle in the wilderness: "He gave us bread from heaven." Jesus answers, Amen, Amen, I tell you . . . it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven, and that bread gives life to the world.

With their heads back, mouths open like baby chicks ready to be fed, they beg, "Give us this bread always." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

The story reveals our susceptibility to the seductiveness of food and to the false comfort of being full. Exodus 16 depicts this human condition. The Hebrew people have just experienced the wonder of Exodus, and as soon as they get good and hungry they start grumbling against Moses: "At least in Egypt we had full stomachs. Did you set us free to let us starve to death in the wilderness?"

God assures Moses that bread will be supplied, a day's portion at a time. Sure enough, in the morning a fine flakelike substance appears on the ground. When the

people see it they say, “What’s that?” which is how manna gets its name, meaning literally “what” and “that.”

The spiritual test for the people is that they receive only a day’s worth of food at a time. Manna is good for 24 hours, then spoils. No use gathering more than they need for the day. But of course they try, and the manna, as promised, spoils. “Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray, but we want more.

We follow gods who fill our bellies, but the God of Israel and Jesus promise more—and less: enough bread for our need but not all we want, so that we can help God get to all people with what they need.

In his book *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, Walker Percy suggests that the French verb *bourrer*, which means “to stuff,” is the source of the English word “boredom.”

Is boredom the state of being stuffed? Are we bored American Christians stuffed with the blessings of God yet unwilling to pass those blessings along? The manna miracle teaches us that blessings stored soon spoil—and ruin the one blessed.

In Georges Bernanos’s novel *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest talks about his congregation and his times:

My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. . . . the world is eaten up by boredom. . . . you can’t see it all at once. It is like dust. You go about and never notice, you breathe it in, you eat and drink it. It is sifted so fine it doesn’t even grit on your teeth. But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be for ever on the go. And so people are always “on the go.” . . . the world has long been familiar with boredom . . . but I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: . . . a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.

Is this the picture of the American church having forgotten the wonder of the Exodus, grumbling over the quality of the Wednesday night fellowship meals, over styles of worship, over theological niceties, anxious about tight budgets and membership rolls while a world starves for bread and Bread?

Is there an “emptying” we need in order to be fed as God would want to feed us, a generosity that allows us to be replenished? Is it possible to live contentedly with the daily bread of the kingdom so that we might help the kingdom come on earth?

In *Traveling Mercies* Anne Lamott writes movingly of her struggle with bulimia and tells of her therapist’s startling counsel for her to learn to feed herself. Let your body feel hunger, she counsels, then feed yourself kindly. Do we need to learn to feel hunger so that we can learn how to feed our bodies? And will this exercise lead us through the door to a deeper hunger and a better bread?

What is the bread of life that Jesus names? The answer may come as we “scroll” back in John to an earlier episode. The disciples have gone looking for bread. Jesus meanwhile engages a Samaritan woman in saving conversation. The disciples return with food and say, “Rabbi, eat!” He answers, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” They think someone else has beaten them there and slipped him a Reuben sandwich. He says, “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to accomplish his work. . . . Look, the fields are ripe for harvest!”

We too are to do the will of God, even as God feeds our deepest hunger with the bread of life.