

The Bread of Life  
Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 16:13b-15  
Reading from the Gospels: John 6:24-35

Driving back from the mountains this week, we were listening to the consistently quirky playlist of that happily offbeat mountain radio station WNCW. One moment you are listening to The Pretenders or Drive-By Truckers and the next moment you are bopping along with Loretta Lynn, The Rolling Stones, Ralph Stanley, the Grateful Dead, or the Theme from Shaft. It leaves your head spinning, but it's a good ride.

We heard one song by Michael Reno Harrell called, *Southern Suggestions*, in which he advised, "The Baptists don't own the South they just use the name; iced tea ain't for breakfast and all barbecue ain't the same ... you don't order grits they just come anytime you say eggs; clear fingernail polish when chiggers get hold of your legs ... these aren't rules, it's just some things that we figured out; to make living easy when you're living here in the South."

You could call these life hacks, learned practices or pragmatic habits that make days go a bit smoother. You are grateful when someone, perhaps a friend clues you into these helpful hints. When you

move to a new town, start a new job, or enroll in a new school you discretely seek out personable or at least malleable folks who can provide such hints as you investigate the lay of the land, the important cultural mores and folkways to know in order that you may avoid embarrassment or offensive behaviors that would spoil your hopes for acceptance and assimilation.

You are not trying to ingratiate yourself, rather in order for you to be your best self you need local knowledge. You are just being pragmatic, expedient with no desire to manipulate or coerce, or exploit. In fact, it is not uncommon for those good souls who so graciously grant you the insider's view to your new community to become your close friends; friends who may in turn be grateful for your knowledge and experience, not to mention the life hacks you may offer to your new community.

One of the classic representations of how this works would be the relationship between Andy and Red in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Sentenced for a crime he did not commit, the educated, urbane, and professional Andy Dufresne could not have survived his incarceration at the vaunted Shawshank penitentiary were it not for the connection he

made with the wisest of insiders, "Red" Redding, a lifer who had already served before decades for Andy arrives. In turn, without Andy's presence in his life, Red would not have been freed from the imprisonment and institutionalization of his spirit. The ground of relationship is not getting but sharing. Pragmatism or expediency may open doors, but it is the mutuality and trust of enduring relationship that gives life.

You see, there can be a fine line between expediency and exploitation, between pragmatism and Machiavellianism. You have *that friend*. Everyone has *that friend*; you know, the one who only seems to acknowledge or appreciate you when they want something from you. You may not have heard from them in years, yet when you answer their phone call, they gush with such glee just to be able to hear the sound of your voice. They regale the memory, as if it was just yesterday that you were frolicking and fellowshipping on the college quad ... But you lived on the other side of campus, nowhere near the quad, and you certainly don't remember any frolicking with them anywhere.

Anyway, social niceties and embellished memories quickly give way to their agenda, having remembered that your home is convenient

to the airport, and could you possibly meet their flight and chauffeur them to their hotel for the convention. They can't linger, though they say they "hate" that you won't have time to catch up, but, you see, the convention schedule is so packed, but hey, all is good and they are so grateful for the favor.

You have *that friend*, who tends to mispronounce your name, but certainly remembers that your sister works for the company for which he has applied to work, and could your sister possibly put in a good word for them? You have *that friend* for whom your worth is measured by their agenda. You have *that friend*, and to be honest, there are times when you are *that friend* to others. We presume in the name of friendship to get what we want. You could call it a form of friendship capitalism; you get the profit, and they get the glory of your momentary attention.

These are the dynamics that confound Jesus in John's Gospel. The crowds are coming, but for what? To the crowd growing before him, Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for 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 for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

For the past few weeks our Scripture texts have been taking us back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, from the territory of Galilee to the area today known as the Golan Heights. At times, Jesus is just seeking to get away from the cloying crowds, but they are relentless in seeking him out. Just before today's story, John speaks of a group from Tiberias traveling across the sea in search of Jesus. They see where Jesus fed the 5000, but no Jesus and no crowd. It's like a scene from an old Western, the grizzled scout nudging the dying embers and ash of a campfire around with his cowboy boot, looking for clues that might send him in the right direction.

Jesus isn't there, so they return to their boats and sail back across the sea to Capernaum. And so it is that Jesus challenges the crowd. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for 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 for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

Admittedly, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is hard to locate, not just geographically, but metaphorically as well. At times there is a seeming disconnect between what he says and what we have the capacity to understand. At times, the crowds and we the readers find ourselves responding ... Huh? Yet, the rub in this text, the disconnect between Jesus and the crowd or the reader is the difference between the Lord we seek and the Lord who is; the Lord we can use to our ends and the Lord who can shape us into his image; the Lord of our convenience and the Lord to whom we offer our lives.

Have you been watching the Tokyo Olympics? There have been several mentions of Japan's superabundance of vending machines. Japan has close to 5,000,000 vending machines, a number higher than what you will find in the United States, which is rather amazing when you figure in that Japan is 1/27th the size of the U.S. The vending machines are everywhere, selling just about everything from soup to underwear to cocktails, to prayer cards, to puppies, yes, actual puppies. You can even buy a bottle of Coca Cola that instantly freezes into a slushie when you turn the bottle upside down.

How often have you stood before the snack machine fretting over whether the Snickers or the Cheez-Its are less likely to get stuck in the machine? However, what frustrates Jesus in our text and is widespread in our culture is our tendency to approach Jesus like a vending machine, not regularly visited but handy when you're in a pinch and need to grab some fast-food religion.

Certainly, there were a variety of motivations triggering the impulse of the crowd to row, row, row their boats back and forth across the sea, but for many, it was the prospect of getting something from Jesus; in this case, a basketful of bagels. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." Drawn by the superficial, the perishable, they seem indifferent to the transformational and the imperishable.

We miss the point when we see Jesus as a vending machine; punch a button and here comes a treat. We miss the point when we approach Jesus, approach faith, approach church like the shoppers who go for the free samples at Costco only to return home to an empty pantry.

We miss the point, and the point is an encounter with the holy, a depth of relationship with the Word made flesh in Jesus, who reorients life, alters lived priorities, opens our eyes to the grace to be found in our neighbors, grants us the life purpose that satisfies hungers far deeper than the growling stomach at mid-day. Jesus said, "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 ... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." i.e. If you choose a church based on the taste of the communion bread, your true hunger will never be met.

Returning to *The Shawshank* Redemption, think about the change in Red and Andy's lives as they grew beyond seeing one another as a grocery list and began to see in each other a spirit that prison walls could not hold.

God, faith, church; it's not about what you can stuff in your basket but who can fill your heart, enlighten your mind, sustain your strength, and resurrect your spirit, calling forth your best self for the healing of the world. Amen.