

November 23rd message

You may recognize the name, John Muir. He is often referred to as the "Father of the National Parks." His work helped establish national parks like Yosemite, Sequoia, and Mount Rainier. He is also credited with inspiring a national movement to protect wild place for the benefit of future generations.

He tells in his book, My First Summer in the Sierra, how important bread was during his experience when he accompanied a shepherd and a flock of sheep in the summer of 1869 to earn extra money. The sheep were led up high into the mountains to escape the heat of the Central Valley of California. This was the beginning of his appreciation for nature. While they had packed plenty of provisions the flour to make bread eventually ran out. Even though there is plenty of other food to eat including mutton, life high in the mountains took a turn. At one point he writes, "... the bread famine is sore." He adds, "The stomach begins to assert itself as an independent creature with a will of its own." Later he wrote "Rather weak and sickish this morning, and all about a piece of bread." Fortunately he writes how, "The affliction was only cured when supplies finally made their way up the mountain, and flour for baking bread was restored!"

"Do not work for food which perishes," Jesus told those who had followed Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus saw how He was becoming a meal ticket. This was right after the feeding of the 5000 men plus the uncounted women and children. People had begun seeking Him because their physical needs were being satisfied. They needed a bit of correcting. Yet He was not necessarily angry. People often went hungry because eating was often day to day whatever you could manage. In that culture, unless you dried it in the sun or salted it down or winnowed it and stowed it in the granary, you had to eat it right away. Otherwise, it would go bad. The gathering of food was a serious business. It took most of your time. You learned to be resourceful, if you needed it, or you wanted it, then you grew it yourself or you bartered for it in the marketplace and you ate it that very day.

This week I read how the early missionaries to India had a similar problem. They would provide rice at their gatherings. They soon found many would show up at these times but not any other. This also was culture where there was a day to day scramble for getting enough to eat every day.

Today we have refrigeration and other ways to buy and store food. It may be hard for us to relate to what these folks went through, but this same message still applies, “work for food that endures to eternal life.”

Today in the United States we are familiar with the term, food insecurity. Food is a necessity, as essential to life as air, water and shelter. Yet for many of the world’s population today, don’t where their next meal will come from. For some people, food insecurity is an ever-present and this is a fact even in our own area.

Then we have the exact opposite; many struggle with eating too much and hunger is easily satisfied. No matter how busy we are, we can usually find food quickly. Even if you live in a small town there are usually options. Then in the larger population centers there are countless so called fast food places. Many folks are so busy they eat while they are in their cars. We can find ourselves so busy that we hardly eat with family. We fill our stomachs, satisfy our hunger for a while, and then do it all over the next day. Whether we realize it or not we are missing the fellowship that comes from sharing around the table.

I also read how family time spent together eating a meal has dropped significantly over the decades. The average length of a family dinner is now about only about 12 minutes.

It’s no big surprise then that sociologists report that more meal time together makes for shared communication and stronger family connections. It also improves nutrition and healthier eating habits and reduces the risk of behavioral problems and future weight issues in children. This of course is common sense to all of us who grew up eating most if not all of our meals together in a family setting, yet news to those who haven’t.

So as we review this information we can make a comparison to what Jesus is getting at. We can look at our time and energy spent on different activities and see to what purpose they are directed at. Yes, we have to make a living and provide for our families and pay the bills, but what about “working for the food that endures.”

These were also spiritually hungry people who followed Jesus that time. We see much of the same today, even in our lives. We can be like those people of the first century, who need to satisfy that spiritual hunger, yet we can get it wrong. We can chase after the wrong things. We can pursue information and knowledge, but not wisdom; we can pursue things that may make us satisfied for a while but then that satisfaction disappears and we want more. We can have lots of good intentions yet not seek opportunities to serve the Lord.

The people that followed Jesus were beginning to understand that he was not talking simply about loaves and fishes or any other physical need. They were beginning to realize that Jesus was pointing to something of everlasting significance in their relationship with God. So they asked, “What must we do to do the works of God?” And Jesus answered, “This is the work of God; to believe in him whom he has sent.”

Sounds simple enough, believe in Jesus. Lots of people do. But there is more to it. One time I attend a large funeral service. One of the speakers began talking about how all you have to do is believe in Jesus to be saved. A red flag went up in my thoughts. A bit later he clarified that a bit and spoke of how that is a start in one’s journey. Once in a while I will visit with folks about their faith. Often people will share how they believe in God and Jesus. But that’s it! Nothing in their life shows it. There is no Bible study, no prayer time, and no commitments to God.

Jesus is inviting us to be well-fed. This is something we need to be intentional about. We need to spend time with him. We need to leave space in our lives and in our hearts for Jesus. There are no quick fixes, there is no shortcut to a rich spiritual life, and in modern terms there is no app for the bread of life Jesus offers.

This is a good time as we approach the Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday to count our blessings. Many do this, I know. Many of us including myself will eat too much including the stuffing and bread. Yet it is also a great time to evaluate our lives and see if we are seeking the right type of bread.

Jesus offers 'living bread' for our lives. This is bread that never runs out and leaves us empty. It is bread that teaches us not to focus on the wrong things and ignore the needs of our soul.

Lately I've had to go to some physical therapy for a shoulder issue I'm having. I've had to add exercises to my daily routine to help it get better. It seems to be helping and I'm hopeful it continues to improve. It's the same with "seeking the bread" Jesus offers. We simply need to set aside time each and every day for prayer and Bible study and/or devotional time. We also need to build a time into our day for gratitude. This has been a wonderful autumn, many of the trees still have their fall color, rather than thinking about the approaching winter we need to recognize the beauty of God's creation. And yes, even when the first snow hits.

While we probably all agree with what I've just said, here's one that might be a bit tougher. Give up a food for a day that you may enjoy. This could help one realize how our spiritual hunger is related to our physical hunger. Often we don't realize how our spirits have been running on low or empty. Like we fill our gas tanks or charge our batteries on our tools we need to pay attention to our spiritual tanks and batteries too.

John combines the message of spiritual hunger and physical hunger together in this passage. We experience both kinds of hunger. Our spiritual hunger can be satisfied by building on the relationship available through Jesus. May we, by the grace of God, know that satisfaction. Amen.