

**Proper 13, Pentecost IX**  
**August 2, 2009**

I'm going to leave King David in the capable hands of Nathan the prophet the morning, and look for a minute at that odd story from John's Gospel.

It's one of those strange stories you run into a lot in John, where the whole thing is based on a misunderstanding, everybody talks right past everybody else, and the resulting conversation, which we just heard, is complex to the point of being weird.

The misunderstanding part is especially clear here. The crowd that had been at the feeding of the multitude has completely missed the boat—in at least two ways. First and literally, they weren't with Jesus and the disciples when they crossed the Sea of Galilee going to Capernaum. They had to get across later—in different boats.

But more importantly, the crowd didn't get it. They simply did not understand what was going on with the loaves. So the questions they ask come from their confusion, so Jesus doesn't really answer any of them. Instead, Jesus talks about what is really going on, and hopes the people listening will catch on. They don't.

Now, in the Gospels it's practically the disciples' and the crowds' *job* to miss the point—so that part's not surprising. However, since the disciples and the crowds often stand in for the Church, there's a pretty good chance that, when we see them getting something seriously wrong, it's pretty likely that we're getting the same thing wrong, too. So it's worth a closer look.

What the crowd is getting wrong has to do with what they need, and what they think Jesus is good for.

Like I talked about last week, the crowd thought Jesus was about filling their bellies; and they liked that. That's what they knew they needed, and they wanted Jesus to keep doing it. Jesus had another idea—we all know what it is; but I want to explore the familiar using some stuff from our culture and some from the Bible.

First of all, it's past being a platitude to say that we live in a consumer culture and that one of the things this means is the our culture has to keep inventing things for us to consume and reasons for us to consume them. So we manufacture needs. (We also manufacture rights and thing we deserve, but that's another story.) Just think about all the things we *need* these days—it's astonishing. It's also a wonderful testimonial to the power of marketing. So we know about needs—just like the crowd pestering Jesus in Capernaum did, perhaps better; after all, we have lots more of them.

That's one big thing the culture says about needs—it says that we have a lot of them, and that they aren't getting fulfilled. And the culture also tells us something else; it tells us that these needs of ours can be fulfilled—and that they can be fulfilled if only we have *more*. More products, or more money, or more time, or more bread from a reliable supplier (like the crowd hoped Jesus would be), more *something*. And it works because part of us knows that at least some of this is true. We know that we are missing something; we know that there is something we need and don't have. We know that we are incomplete. And we hope for fulfillment.

These days all of this is sort of a secret. We don't talk about it much; but we know that it's there. We also know, or at our best moments we strongly suspect, that *more* is not the real answer—at least not as much more as we've managed to accumulate so far. But, bless our hearts, we persist.

So we all too often end up often trying to complete our secret incompleteness by hurling all sorts of things and people into it—hoping against our experience that one of them, maybe this time, will make things all right; and that our sense of incompleteness will go away. As a culture, we do this a lot—and we’re very good at it.

Now, standing next to our culture is our tradition, especially Scripture; and it agrees with some, but not all, of this. We *are* incomplete, that’s right. But our incompleteness is rooted, not in our wardrobe, or in our portfolio, or in our choice of products, but in our natures—in who we really are. Some of the best theology on this, (indeed some of the best theology in human history), is in the first couple of chapters of Genesis. Here we are told that to be a human being means something. In fact, to be a human being means lots of things. For one thing, it means being created in the image of God and so being precious to God. But at the same time it means that we are incomplete—to be a human being means that we are, by our very nature, estranged, or alienated, from ourselves, from one another, from the created order, and from God. That’s the way it is. It’s this inherent, natural estrangement that makes us sitting ducks for our consumer culture; a culture that says, quite rightly, that there is something missing within us—but that then proceeds to offer us a constant parade of bogus or defective ways of filling that emptiness.

Not even bread itself, the very stuff of life, is enough. To try, like that crowd in the Gospel, to insure that there will always be bread—not even this will get us where we want to be.

Bread, all necessary stuff, can't fill our incompleteness—but it can, perhaps, hint at, and maybe point us toward, these deepest longings and half-glimpsed visions of being whole, of being complete, visions that persist in our depths even when we think they shouldn't.

So Jesus offers the crowd bread, not to meet their needs, but more as bait, to lure them deeper into what it means to be hungry, and into what it might mean to be full, to be really satisfied. The crowd wants to stop at the bread, Jesus won't let them.

Jesus knew that their needs, like most of mine and I suspect most of ours, these needs don't need to be met—they need to be transformed. The point is not that we get what we want; the point is that we learn to want what we need.

The bread that Jesus offers is a sort of icon for all of the unarticulated hungers and longings that are so basic, so universal, to human life that we have become so habituated to missing them that we cannot name them.

So, to the crowd and to us, Jesus offers what we need—whether we want it or not. He offers himself—which is really what the bread was about, and is really what we are about, and is really what God is about, too—the gift of himself, the gift of his presence and the healing that it can bring. That way, the needs that now consume us can pull back, the incompleteness can begin to be filled, and whoever follows his path can know what it means not to be hungry.

The bread is bait, he is the real goal.