

## "Signs or Sustenance?"

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Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 51:1-6  
New Testament Lesson – John 6:24-29

Thomas Edison, possibly the greatest inventor in history, lived in a large house with a huge fence around it. Visitors had to push open a heavy iron gate in order to enter the compound, and then push it back again until it clanked shut. One of Edison's friends complained to him about the tremendous amount of energy it took to open and shut that gate.

With a twinkle in his eye Edison escorted his friend up onto the roof of his house and showed him an elaborate mechanical device made up of levers and pulleys and pumps. "What you don't know," said Edison, "is that everyone who comes to visit me and opens and closes that gate, automatically pumps a gallon of water into the tank up here on the roof." Isn't that often what happens in our own walk with God? When we invite God in aren't we thinking, "What can you do for me?" The disciples went looking for Jesus because of what he could do for them – fill their bellies with a miraculous amount of bread. And Jesus stops them in their tracks and says, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Today's New Testament lesson is all about a disciple's motives in following Jesus *and* the motivation of Jesus, himself, in coming alongside us. As it turns out, these are almost always two different things- our motives and Jesus' purpose in our lives. Jesus, in essence, says to his disciples – us included – "Hey, what are looking for, anyway – **a sign or sustenance?**" Jesus redefines both the signs (or miracles) he does and the sustenance (or food) that he brings. He says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." The disciples are looking for Jesus because he performed a miracle in the Feeding of the Five Thousand, a pretty cool miracle for people with empty bellies and nowhere to get food. And Jesus says, yes, food is important – health, happiness, success, friends, loved ones, a good job, doing well in your studies – all these things are important, but they are not the be-all-to-end-all. They may form the basis of our motivation in life, but they are not what Jesus came here to give to you – to give us. Do you see how Jesus questions our motives in following him when he questions why we look to him in the first place saying it shouldn't be because of the signs but because of the sustenance he brings – spirit – and nourishment? **What motivates you** in being here today? What are you hoping to get out of it for yourself and those you love? Perhaps our having material wealth, a successful career, and a happy and well-adjusted family is not what Jesus came here to bring us. And it it's not to have material things and our lives always working out great why

do we look to follow Jesus at all? I'm glad you asked that. Because that's just what the disciples asked. "Jesus", they said, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Now, when they ask this, the disciples are not asking what must they do to do miracles like Jesus does, as if those are the works of God they're asking about. No, they're asking what must they do to do God's will. And Jesus answers them, saying, "This is the work of God (the will of God), that you believe in him whom he has sent."

Belief, trust, faith in Jesus Christ is both the will of God and *our* first job as Christians. Anything else we have in life – money, a career, friends and family – any and all of it comes as a gift from God. We enjoy God's blessings above and beyond what Jesus really came to give to us – which, again, is what? Pop quiz time? It was just said when we talked about our first job as Christians. What did Jesus come to give as God incarnate? What is the food that endures for eternal life? As Jesus said, it is "that you believe in him whom (God) has sent." So, what it is that ***Jesus give us is our faith***. That is the food that sustains us in this life and the next.

We may *think* we need lots of other stuff in life – but Jesus is saying, no, you don't *need* any of that stuff to follow Jesus and to live eternally with God. And in fact, clinging too tightly to any of those things – money, prestige, even family, friends and our own health – clinging too tightly to earthly matters just gets in the way. And it's not necessary. God loves us so much as to freely give us any blessings we may enjoy. But these blessings will do us no good if we cling to them while ***letting our faith slip through our fingers***. What would it be like ***to live without faith?***

This summer I read a book titled "The Leftovers," by Tom Perrotta, (it's linked to our church Facebook page). In "The Leftover," we travel alongside the good citizens of Mapleton USA as they come to grips with what is simply called "the Occurrence." The Occurrence was a global, rapture-like disappearance of people – millions of people. And in Mapleton, it meant that you may have been sitting with your family at the dinner table one moment and – poof – you are sitting their alone; but without the poof. Without anything. No explanation, and no return of your loved ones. Years go by and it becomes clear that this is not the rapture. God has not taken up the chosen few and left behind some "guilty remnant," those people who didn't quite make the cut. We know this because "good" people were disappeared and "bad" people were disappeared. "Good" people were left behind and "bad" people were left behind. If this was God's rapture, then God didn't care whether you were good or you were bad. If this was God's doing, then God acted willy-nilly, taking some and leaving the rest for no reason at all. And that's something most people just could not believe – that God would do such a thing. So they stopped believing in anything. Families, friendships, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, communities – all torn apart. And with nothing left to believe in – *and* no guarantee it won't happen again to the rest of them at any moment – the good people of Mapleton just can't find any motivation in life, no reason to rebuild and no hope to build upon.

What would life be like? Well, according to the author, Tom Perrotta, a straight-A student might shave her head, get a few body tats – tattoos – and stop trying at school, if she even made it to school most days. According to Perrotta, an otherwise normal guy grieving the disappearance of his daughter might begin speaking out to anybody who would listen. And such a guy might just work himself up into a national, cult figure, promising the advent of a new Messiah. And a guy such as that, according to Perrotta, would eventually crash and burn in a scandal of sex, money and power.

But this isn't the Gospel According to Perrotta. It's the ***Gospel of Jesus Christ***. And this gospel says that faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is more important than any earthly treasures or comforts we may enjoy or long for. And in the end, Perrotta's novel says the same thing.

***Signs or Sustenance?*** Earthly food that is here today and gone tomorrow or spiritual nourishment that endures forever? This is our choice. This is what Jesus came to give to us. The choice, and in that, the true substance: our faith Jesus offers us a faith that withstands the loss of any of life's pleasures. And in fact, without such a faith and dedication to God, we can't truly enjoy life's pleasures and God's blessings. Without faith true life – the life that Jesus offers us – breaks down.

Author William A. Wilson recalls the story of two Mormon missionaries who tried to convert a protestant minister.<sup>1</sup> But, the minister got it in his mind to test *their* comment to Mormonism. He was hoping their faith would be lacking and he could get out of the conversation and win the argument. "He said, 'Gentlemen, I have here a glass of poison. If you will drink this poison and remain alive, I will join your church, not only myself but my entire congregation.' And (then) he said, 'If you won't drink this poison, well then I'll conclude that you are false ministers of the Gospel, because surely your Lord won't let you perish.' ... As this put the missionaries in kind of a bind, ... they went off in a corner and got their heads together, and they thought, 'What on earth are we going to do?' So finally, after they decided, they went back over and approached the minister and said, 'Tell you what – we've got a plan.' They said, '*You* drink the poison, and *we'll* raise you from the dead.'"

What do you and I value most in this world? Do you value and trust your faith even at this risk of your own life? This is the type of faith Jesus came to bring us: the type of faith that has us convinced of God's presence and providence in our lives whether we are prospering or not.

When Jesus said to the disciples, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent,' they responded by asking for more signs so that they could believe in Jesus. They were OK with doing God's will as long as they got a miracle to prove they could count on God to meet their earthly and spiritual needs – to feed them "body and soul".

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<sup>1</sup> The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries (Utah State University Press, 1981).

And Jesus says, in the verses that follow after our reading for today, he says, "...It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' (And the disciples say) to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' And Jesus says 'I am the bread of life,' 'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

The next time you are hungry or thirsty – the next time you or I feel deprived because work is kickin' our butts, or your friends dis you at school, or our expenses outpace our bank accounts, or some body – maybe your body – is suffering wear and tear or disease or illness, the next time the "earthly bread of *this* life" tastes a little rotten and unsatisfying, ask yourself – I need to ask myself – where is my faith. Is my faith – is your faith – in the material comforts of this world or in the eternal promises of God? Is our greatest, most precious gift the things of this world or is it our faith, our faith in what is possible and promised with God? Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious God, you are the fountain of all wisdom, the life source from whom we learn all that is good, pure, merciful and compassionate. Thank you for the example of your Son, who in all things modeled peacemaking, love for others, and the wisdom that comes from walking rightly with you. Just as people were drawn to him, we draw near to you, wanting to know you, to experience your presence, and be renewed by your Spirit. As we open ourselves to you, we come in prayer for those who are hurting. Relationships fail us when we need them most, our health suffers and deteriorates, we see loved ones struggle and find ourselves at a loss of how to help.

So today we pray for those who feel desperate – for those who feel that there is no hope. God, bring them hope. Let those who draw close to their final rest know the peace of being a child of God, loved and cared for in this life and the next. Show them – and us – that you hold all people in the palm of your hand. For you love us and care about us so deeply – as deeply and self-giving as the best parent imaginable.

Thank you for teaching us how to rightly stand before you. And above all, for giving us the deep peace that comes from being faithful and obedient disciples of the Lord. The witness and the words that you give us are what truly sustain us in our greatest need. They so clearly reflect your awesome vision and almighty power. They are words that connect us eternally to your divine presence, through Jesus Christ who unites us in you, as we pray together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

