

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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Date: August 1, 2021, Yr. B 10th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: John 6:24-35

Title: Reading the Signs

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there [beside the sea], they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ ²⁶Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do 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 it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’ ²⁸Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ ²⁹Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ ³⁰So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?’ ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ³²Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which* comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ³⁴They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

³⁵ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

Reading the Signs. . . can be confusing

I remember one time when we visited my brother John for Thanksgiving. He lives in San Francisco. In his neighborhood, parking is usually not too hard to find, but this particular time he arranged for us to stay at a friend’s house who was away and let us stay at his place in a nearby neighborhood where parking was more scarce. When we drove there late that night after having dinner at my brother’s we were relieved to find a spot. The next morning, we were irritated to come out to discover a parking ticket on the windshield of our car. “Where was the ‘NO Parking’ sign?”

I walked up the street looking for a parking sign. Finally I found it—obscured by an overgrown tree. As I recall, street sweeping only happened once a month, but of course it was scheduled for that day when we were parked there.

- It was frustrating that that day happened to be the one day of the whole month(!) that it was street sweeping day and therefore no parking on that side of the street. It was frustrating to not see the sign.

Road signs are meant to promote courteous driving and overall safety. Some signs are helpful and some aren't very clear. I could have read the Restricted Parking sign and understood it just fine, but when we were in an unfamiliar neighborhood and the sign was behind the branch of a tree, we got stuck with a parking ticket.

Sometimes road signs are clear and helpful and sometimes they are confusing.

Helpful signs



Confusing signs



“Bridges Freeze First” confusing sign: I may have told you that when I was a young man I moved from where I grew up in Southern California to Johnson City, Tennessee to begin work with youth at the First Presbyterian Church there. I loaded up a rental truck with all of my stuff and drove with my buddy Jeff across the country. It was August and hot and I remember seeing road signs on the highway somewhere in west Tennessee that were confusing to me. The signs read **“Bridges Freeze First”**

It was August and hot and humid and I couldn't even guess what that meant.

- A sign like one of these one would be more clear to me:



Funny signs:



Wow—in and out surgery within 5 minutes. I don't think I'd want that!



What's this? Beware of car-eating dragons?

Loch ness monsters?

We rely on signs in other areas of our life, too, don't we? And sometimes those signs are clear and helpful and sometimes they're more confusing.

In the book of John, the gospel writer refers to Jesus' powerful acts not as "miracles," but as "signs."

One of the things that I think John means to convey about the use of the term *sign* is that it is intended, like a road sign, to point the way or point out something else. More specifically, a sign in John points out something important about Jesus.

The Crowd asks for a sign

In today's text, the crowd follows Jesus. In the previous section, vv. 1-21, which was the passage designated for last Sunday, but we did not read it because we were celebrating "Christmas in July" (with the text from John 1), Jesus has fed 5000 people, another *sign* in the gospel of John.

In today's text, the people in the crowd approach Jesus. They ask him for a sign (v. 30), which is odd-funny or ironic because they have just witnessed one—Jesus feeding 5000 people.

When they ask Jesus for a sign, they point out that their ancestors ate manna in the desert. Jesus confirms that they ate manna, but attributes that not to Moses, as they

seem to do, but to God, and further says, “it is God who **gives** the true bread from heaven.” Jesus attributes the action to God and says it’s not a past event, but says it is what God is doing in the present.

Manna was a sign—it pointed to the presence of God

In the wilderness in Exodus, the significance is not just the manna itself—that they had food, but what the manna as a sign pointed to. The event or the meaning of the manna was not just of the manna as bread or that they were fed, but that **God was with them, that God was with them in the wilderness, and that God could be trusted, day by day.**

You may remember that God provided specific instruction about how the manna should be gathered when it appeared as dew on the ground each morning. They were to gather as much as they needed, but not save any overnight. Those who tried to save some found it spoiled the next day (Exodus 16:19-20). Except before the Sabbath, they gathered an extra portion and prepared it and set it aside and it was not spoiled, but was ready for them to eat on the Sabbath (Ex.16:22-31).

They learned to follow God’s instructions and that God was trustworthy.

What’s the sign about Jesus?

Manna was a sign not just of the physical food that was provided, but that God was with them and God could be trusted, day-by-day. In this dialogue in John, Jesus identifies himself as sustaining bread. He identifies himself as the presence of God. He is saying God is once again present.

Jesus says,

³²Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

- Do you hear the two shifts there? Isn’t not Moses, but God and it’s not the past, but what God is doing in the present.

³⁴They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

What’s the sign or what does it mean or what does the sign point to?

- Jesus is the one who gives life to the world.
- Jesus is the one who offers a kind of bread—his very self—which satisfies not just physical hunger, but our deepest needs.

Hungry? For what?

When the crowd approached Jesus, he knows they are seeking bread. Who can blame them? Who can think of anything else when they are physically hungry, exhausted and beaten down? Jesus knows their yearning for rest and sustenance. He has compassion on them after all. He is not chastising them for seeking bread. I don't think he's scolding them and wagging his finger at them. He is telling them he has so much more to give them. Jesus tells the crowd hungry for food and desperate to be valued that he offers eternal life. In John's Gospel, eternal life is abundant life and it starts here and now and never ends.¹ (It's not just a hoped-for, future promise.) Abundant life is or begins in the present.

When Jesus says, ³³ “the bread of God which comes down from heaven gives life to the world,” he's describing another sign that is pointing to something else—that Jesus is the one who offers this abundant life which fills not just physical need.

May we welcome Jesus' invitation to come and receive this bread and discover the abundant life he offers.

¹ Acknowledgment to Jill Duffield of *Presbyterian Outlook*