

Michael Gehring
“The Bread of Heaven”
John 6: 24-35
Main Street UMC
August 5, 2018

The Scripture passage this morning is complicated and leaves us with many questions. The New Testament theologian Sakari Häkkinen wrote, *“In the Ancient world poverty was a visible and common phenomenon.”* (HTS Theologese Studies 72/4) He stated that 9 out of 10 people lived at or below subsistence level. Subsistence level is defined as having barely enough resources to sustain life. The middle-class, as we think of it, didn’t exist. Social safety nets such as Social Security, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits were non-existent. Of that 90%, it is estimated that 2/3 lived in extreme poverty.

Last week I mentioned the rural beauty of Tabga, and how one can almost visualize Jesus and the 5000 there. I also stated that some of the 18th and 19th century European theologians said the miracle that day was that Jesus inspired everyone to share what they had. The problem is that the great majority had next to nothing and didn’t arrive at Tabga that day with an abundance of food in a picnic basket like you and I would have. What if they arrived there with stomachs growling, with sunken eyes, fear consuming their hearts worried about how they were going to feed their children and themselves?

One verse that really stands out from last week’s pericope is verse 15:
“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

When I was a freshman at Arkansas Tech University, I lived in Turner Hall. ATU didn’t have frat houses so all the Greeks lived in the dorms and in Turner Hall we had no shortage of 18 and 19-year-olds reveling in their new-found freedom. But there was this other guy who lived on the first floor of Turner Hall who stood out from the crowd. We were late teens or early twenties and he was in his 60’s. We spoke with southern accents and he spoke with a heavy German accent. One day I was hanging out in his room and in conversation it came up that he had served in the German Army during the Third Reich. Stunned and indignant, like only an 18-year-old can be who knows very little of the world outside his habitat, I said, *“How could you serve in an army that had Adolf Hitler as the Führer?”* As long as I live, I will never forget his answer and the look that he gave me, the look of trying to help someone understand something that was completely foreign, removed, something that they just didn’t have a clue about. He said, *“Hitler gave me boots for my feet and potatoes for my stomach.”*

No wonder the crowd in Tabga that day wanted to make Jesus king. Out of one boy's offering of 5 loaves and 2 fish he feed 5000 people of which at least 60% were in extreme poverty and most likely came that day ravenous hungry. It said in the Gospel that they all had their fill. The great majority probably couldn't remember the last time their stomachs were so full. Of course, they wanted to make him king, wouldn't you? *Happy days are here again. We've got the man who can easily do what we're struggling to do and that is to provide food for our children. Let the good times roll.*

But it is this point in the story that we struggle. Jesus says to the crowd once they find him again, "*Are you looking for me because you've had your fill of bread?*" And the answer is, "*of course.*" Jesus then said, "*but that's not what I've come here for, to just give you bread that perishes. I've come to give you spiritual nourishment that will never go away for you see, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

We gather here today before the mystery of these words and the mystery of the bread and cup. Let us prepare our hearts to receive these gifts.