

The crowd went looking for Jesus and they found him. Jesus told them ‘you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.’ Jesus as usual goes right to the heart of people’s motives. Everyone wants a free lunch. The crowd sought a miracle not to learn about Jesus or about how God is at work in the world. They want their physical needs met.

However, Jesus knows what the crowd really seeks.

Why do we look for Jesus? There are lots of answers: Our parents or someone we respect may have asked us to or intrigued us with their faith and lifestyle. We may have loneliness and want companionship that other people can’t give. We think it is the right thing to do.

We may look for Jesus in self-centered ways: We want control of our past, present and future. We want answers to our anxieties. We want security.

We may look for Jesus as guided by the spirit: We are dissatisfied with our spiritual condition. We sense the seriousness of our sin. We are longing for life.

Jesus knows what we really seek.

Jesus says, ‘Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.’ The effort of people goes into things that don’t last, but only provide momentary satisfaction. Good feeling for today over long term satisfaction. The difference between an affair and a life-long commitment in marriage. Also we spend so much effort feeling as if the world is over because of one mistake we have made when there is eternal forgiveness available.

(In 1 Kings, Elijah encountered a widow. He asked for water and bread. She had no bread to give. She was about to go home and make a loaf for her and her son from the last of her oil and flour. Elijah asked for her to make it for him and then make some for you and your son. God will keep the oil and flour from running out. For the widow to listen to Elijah, she had to take a risk to look beyond her immediate predicament in order to find life in the midst of that very predicament.)

How do we gain life (eternal life) in the midst of living, in the urgency of feelings, the immediacy of needs?

In John the crowd assumes they must work for that food that endures to eternal life. The crowd asks, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ This is a question of doing rather than receiving. Jesus corrects this by saying the work of God is to believe in him whom he has sent.

The widow had to believe that Elijah is one sent by God to have life. She didn't have to work harder to get more oil or flour. She simply needs to believe. What she did showed her belief in God.

The crowds are more resistant than the widow. They responded, 'show us a sign.' 'What work are you performing, our ancestors got fed everyday!' Jesus you show us how you bring life. We are quick to assume that if we are supposed to live, God needs to do something and do it in a way that is obviously ongoing. Maybe you imagine: pizza gift certificates arriving in your mail box weekly. Maybe you imagine an all you can eat pasta buffet opening down the street. Is it only physical food that brings life?

Jesus says, God is doing something and it is obvious and it is bigger than even what you hope for. 'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' Jesus gives a sign, himself. 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.' Is this what we and the crowd are looking for? They have just been fed miraculously. Jesus is among them. We have experienced blessings. Jesus is among us. Jesus challenges all people, 'you have seen me and yet do not believe.'

This makes me think of playing hide and seek with a young child. After the adult closes her eyes to count, just as she starts to look, the child pops out so we find them, or they make noises to make sure that we can find them. The adult will often ignore the obvious clues and say 'where are you' and look in other places. This seems to be what happens with Jesus, though unintentionally.

We look for more to life, when Jesus is right there offering eternal life to all who believe. The signs the crowds look for obscure what is already there for them, Jesus. All the time these signs point to Jesus whose healing and feeding gifts are never exhausted, who offers a satisfaction that never passes. Like the crowd, we enjoy the effect of Jesus without believing. We receive his blessings (health, family, love, etc.) This is different than receiving Jesus himself. By themselves blessings never seem to bring lasting satisfaction.

Enjoying the effect of seeing without believing makes life a 'rat race' where we pursue satisfaction. We see the good things Jesus offers that make up 'life'. We do all we can to get and keep hold of them. We need material signs, the healing and the feeding to keep following Jesus. We work to have spiritual experiences which fade, when there is a relationship with God offered day in and day out in Jesus Christ.

Works that we want to do mistake how God is working in us to bring life. When people ask me why I serve at Bell Memorial, I say because there is life. Not because there are lots of programs or a business, but because I can see Jesus at work among us. Our works can't achieve what we desire above all else.

If we don't work for life, often demands are made of God. These are overtaken by what we are given. We look for what Jesus can give, will we see that he is what we need? Jesus gives eternal satisfaction. Jesus brings the life we need. Believing in Jesus we discover (eternal) life even as we live.

Missionary Lesslie Newbigin leaves us with the question, "What is the path that will take us out of the meaningless maze of satisfactions pursued and achieved only to be forgotten in an ever-new dissatisfaction?"ⁱ

ⁱ Newbigin, Lesslie, "The Light Has Come" p, 79