

August 5, 2018  
John 6:24-35  
“Feeding on the Nothing that is Everything”  
Michael Stanfield

<sup>24</sup> So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus 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. <sup>27</sup> Do 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.” <sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” <sup>30</sup> So 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?” <sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” <sup>32</sup> Then 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. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” <sup>34</sup> They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” <sup>35</sup> 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. *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, Our Rock and Redeemer, Amen.*

My favorite comedy show of all time, bar none, is Seinfeld. Even though I have watched every episode dozens of times, each and every one still has the ability to make me laugh out loud. Jerry Seinfeld and his co-creator and writer, Larry David are both keen observers of human behavior and have a knack for seeing the humor in the most mundane of human interactions. In fact, the genius of the show is how cleverly Seinfeld and David poke fun even at themselves.

Based as it is based on the events in the lives of Seinfeld and David themselves, the show is the ultimate in art imitating life, with the character of George Costanza acting as a stand-in for David.

In season four we discover hilariously, that from the very beginning the series was conceived as “The Show about Nothing.” In one episode of that season, NBC approaches Jerry after one of his stand-up gigs and invites him to pitch an idea about a pilot for a comedy show in which he would star. He consults George who comes up with the brilliant idea that theirs will be the “Show about Nothing.” “Everybody else is doing SOMETHING he tells Jerry. But our show will be about nothing.”

And indeed, the show, unlike any other when it debuted in 1989, really had no huge premise. It was just four friends in New York City whose ordinary lives yet revealed extraordinarily ironic absurdities. There is no growth on the part of the characters and no pathos which makes comedy its absolute central focus. The things that run through the minds of Seinfeld characters are the things that run through our minds but that we shy from saying. And rightly so; for as we see, carrying out these thoughts have disastrous consequences that are yet extraordinarily funny. So hilarious were they, that to this day, rarely does a week go by when something doesn’t happen in the life of a family member or a friend of mine that does not remind me of a similar event on an episode of Seinfeld and how it was handled there.

And I am not alone in how I have been affected. As a result of the show, a whole lexicon of phrases and words has now entered the common vernacular of fans everywhere. Phrases and words like:

- "No soup for you!"
- "Not that there's anything wrong with that!"
- Festivus for the rest of us.
- double-dipping
- re-gifter
- close-talker
- low-talker
- man-hands and
- Serenity Now!

And so, the comedy show about nothing turned out to be everything – at least when it came to comedy.

In similar fashion, in today's text, Jesus offers bread that does nothing for belly yet supposedly fills one so that they hunger no more. A bread that is nothing is actually a bread that is everything...

Somewhere in the classic novel, "Alice in Wonderland", the White Rabbit says to Alice who, at the time, is frantic, "Don't just do something, stand there."

Don't just do something, stand there.

Like Seinfelds' show about nothing, it's just the opposite of the Protestant work ethic, drilled into most of our heads as children, as our parents, teachers and coaches shouted at us, "Don't just stand there, *do* something!"

Jesus tells us today not to labor for the bread that perishes.

But the fact is, we Americans seem to be addicted to labor. While we, in this country, take an average of 15 vacation days a year, not including week-ends the rest of the industrialized world is on break for a much longer time. Italy tops the list with 45 days of vacation. They are followed by France with 38 days, Germany with 37, Brazil with 34, Britain with 28, and Canada with 26 days.

No wonder so many of us who reach the later years of life and naturally slow down yet feel we are no longer worth much because we just can't do as much...

At events, where we are introduced to strangers the first question we ask and that is asked of us is "What do *you do* for a living?" – right? Or if you are retired, what *did* you *do* before you retired. And so we unavoidably equate our living with our doing.

When something goes wrong in our lives, our churches, our workplaces, our schools or our nation (which seems to be happening quite a lot lately), what's the first thing we cry for? "Why doesn't *somebody DO something*?"

In our morning text we find that those who had just experienced the miracle of being fed the loaves and fishes by Jesus follow him across the Sea of Galilee. And they follow because *they* are full of

similar questions. Prominent among their wonderings was the question “What must *we do* to perform the works of God?”

Somewhere in their minds was the hope that if they just got the steps right, they, *too*, could know and do the will of God. They *too* could produce enough food to feed thousands out of a few loaves and fishes. But when Jesus tells them that all the “work” they have to do is to believe in Jesus and basically *do* nothing except simply *be* in relationship with him, that isn’t enough.

“Okay,” they respond, “so what are *you* going to *do* to prove to us that is all we have to *do* and that you are worth having a relationship with? What *thing* are you doing? What *work* are you performing? Let’s see you bring forth more bread from heaven like Moses did so we’ll know that what you did back there on the hillside wasn’t just a one-time fluke. We want to see more evidence.”

Evidence. Evidence based learning. Evidence based psychotherapy. If I see one more article in a journal sighting either of these, I think I will go bonkers. When will we learn, people are not cogs in a machine. I sometimes have absolutely no idea the effect I am having on someone – either as a pastor or a therapist. I can think I am a failure – only to have someone come back to me years later to tell me that I what I did that I thought was nothing turned out to be everything to them.

People with psychological and emotional difficulties are not healed by some new behavioral technique that is *done to* them. Learning and healing happen as a result, first and foremost, of a loving bond of trust between teacher and pupil – between therapist and patient, pastor and congregant, between friend and friend, between brother and sister in Christ.

To the people’s demand for evidence-based proof – turning stones to bread – Jesus responds that God has already brought forth everything that is needed – it’s a new kind of bread – a bread from heaven – the likes of which no one on earth has ever seen. For it is none other than Jesus, standing there before them: this *is* God’s “work” - not a “what” but a “who”. It is a living bread that dwells lovingly among them – a new kind of spiritual food – a kind of bread that Jesus incarnates – a kind of sustenance that feeds the deepest and most basic of human hungers: the need to connect – with God and with others.

This bread will touch them, heal them and enable them to do amazing things – only, it won’t *feel* like most work.

Jesus is trying to get them to stop focusing so much *on* the *doing* side of things – whether that be God’s doing, their doing, or Jesus’ doing – so that they simply stand still long enough to understand that what God actually wants is to be one with them.

What God wants is for them to be aware of God’s presence so that they can experience God’s will – something that is, at the same time, terrible and wonderful; something sublime; something that has *them* rather than something that *they* have or can attain by work. For the truth is that no matter how many works they do, they cannot be in charge of their own destiny, or the destiny of the world.

“You cannot be in control,” Jesus says, “but you can submit to the one who is and so find the freedom and energy and joy and love to know that in him you are amazing and thus are called to amazed living.” But before there is any doing, there must be that “being still to know” that God is

God. There must be personal knowledge of God that is real and unequivocal – not just knowledge by way of following a prescribed path.

Obviously, this was as frustrating to Jesus' listeners then as it is to so many of today. It is why so many claim to know God when in reality they are only spouting the traditional Christian" party line. The response of the crowd to Jesus' assertion that all the work they need to do is simply to trust and surrender, reminds me of the common response among a group of teenagers in a classroom when the professor is teaching and someone shouts out, "Will this be on the exam?"

"Will this be on the exam?" The implication is that if it is not going to be on the exam, if it is not going to be useful in getting a good grade then it is not worth my time or attention. But the bread of heaven doesn't work this way anymore than you can measure the value of a good education regardless of grades. It is a treasure for which the term "useful" does not translate well because it brings a *quality* of life that makes the term "useful" seem silly. Indeed, the life of Christ is much more about the *quality* of our relationships with one another and with God than it is about all the good things we try to *do* – no matter how noble those deeds...

Those of you who bake bread regularly know the common, often unspoken, prayer that you not kill the yeast. The yeast is a living thing that helps flour and sugar become more than the sum of their parts. The yeast gives body and richness and texture to bread as it grows during the rising process, a process that can take many hours. In the same way, growing in Christ, means setting aside the time and space to let the yeast of Christ grow in us.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Whistling in the Dark*, defines faith as "less a position than a journey, less a realization, than a relationship."

And such journeying, such a relationship takes time – time to be with God.

An economics professor at Warwick University in England has done a study on the intricacies of human happiness. A part of that research indicates that real happiness is a function of being connected to something much bigger than we are that we have experienced unequivocally as that in which we can put our trust. Hence, it can be said that there is a scientifically proven positive relationship between one being consciously connected to God and one's ultimate ability to be happy.

This suggests that we turn our focus from always "doing" in order to feel useful – to connecting with God through making time for surrendering to God in Christ.

There is great wisdom in just being with God and reflecting. The prophet Isaiah (40:31) reminds us that they who wait on the Lord will find the strength of eagles to run the race set before us!

However, if you are like me, you may have discovered that in the past, in spite of your good faith attempts to set aside daily time to do the "nothing that is everything", the frantic pace of the world in which you live soon robs you of that good faith. In that case, it helps to have *someone* or some group to whom you are obliged to meet and share *what* you have been reflecting upon; otherwise you may loathe to take any time at all.

If you have someone or some group to whom you report regularly and share what is going on with you and where you see God moving and receive their feedback, you will not only take the time, you will most likely find that you enjoy it.

We will soon be starting a new year in Christian Education here at Trinity. This means that there will be new Sunday school classes and other small group gatherings starting up again.

I would encourage you to take advantage of these offerings. And if none of these strike your fancy, one of the best ways to ensure that you will take time out to partake of the bread from heaven is to lead a small group yourself. If you need help getting started, the Outreach Committee would be glad to lend a hand at their gathering on August 19 at 9:00 am.

Are you tired of *doing* all the time so that you can afford to buy bread, while often being left spiritually hungry or thirsty? Then find some time to partake of the bread Christ offers.

To close, I share a favorite story of mine that Garrison Keelor once shared about his fictitious home town of Lake Wobegon. It concerns folks returning to the Lutheran church there for the annual summer homecoming. He recounts:

Larry the Sad Boy was there, who was saved twelve times in the Lutheran Church, an all-time record. Between 1973 and 1981, he threw himself weeping and contrite on God's throne of grace on twelve separate occasions – and this in a Lutheran Church that wasn't evangelical, had no altar call, no organist playing 'Just As I Am Without One Plea' while a choir hummed and a guy with shiny hair took hold of your heartstrings and played you like a cheap guitar – this is the Lutheran Church, not a bunch of hillbillies; these are Scandinavians, and they repent in the same way that they sin: discreetly, tastefully, at the proper time, and bring a Jell-O salad for afterward. Larry Sorenson came forward weeping buckets and crumpled up at the communion rail, to the amazement of the minister, who had delivered a dry sermon about stewardship, and who now had to put his arm around this limp, soggy individual and pray with him and see if he had a ride home. Twelve times. Even we fundamentalists got tired of him. Granted, we're born in original sin, but twelve conversions is too many. God didn't mean us to feel guilt all our lives. There comes a point when you should dry your tears, rest on God's grace, and live your life out of that Grace; but Larry kept on repenting and repenting."

Bottom line: God is loving, merciful and trustworthy. God has given – is giving us – eternal bread from heaven which is the Christ. So let's take some time to set our minds on the things of God. Let's encourage our old selves to fade into the background – in order to make some room for the new self – the self that can just be with God and be satisfied.

Let us pray. Father, forgive us for the ways we reject your greatest gift – the bread from Heaven – your son Jesus, whose greatest desire is to be with us and guide us along the way. Help us to take time to partake of that bread so that we might be energized to carry out your work in the world rather than being tied up in knots about things that really don't matter much to you or to us, for that matter, in the long run.

And now we ask your blessing upon these tithes and offering we bring that they may help bring the good news of your bread from heaven to a hungry world. We pray these things in His name, Amen