

John 6:35, 41-51

August 8, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

We were up early to beat the sweltering heat as we departed on the 8-mile Devil's Garden primitive trail within Arches Nation Park. A small section of this hike is highly trafficked, well-marked and well-maintained leading to one of the most popular arches in the park, Landscape Arch. However, beyond that first mile or so is a 6-mile loop through sand and over massive sections of smooth, red rock. At times, especially in the sand, it's pretty apparent where the trail is. Other times, especially upon those rocks, one might occasionally spot a "cairn", which is nothing more than 4-5 small rocks stacked one on top of the other to help guide your way. The key word there is "occasionally" because they're not always easily spotted or perhaps have been knocked down and look just like any other small rock dotting the much larger rock beneath. We noticed early on we had the trail mostly to ourselves and saw only a handful of fellow hikers, which meant we couldn't rely on a game of follow-the-leader so to speak. No, we needed something else to guide us and we had just that, an app on our phone showing a perfectly outlined trail and a small blue dot that follows along, which was our location. Pretty simple. Just follow the dot to make certain it stays on the line. Well, simple if you look at your phone constantly. For just a short stretch of trail, I failed to peek at that app, and wouldn't you know it, we took a wrong turn that led down a short but steep rock face that near the end we had to practically slide down on our behinds making it next to impossible to get back up.

Now, we must have not been the only ones who had made this mistake as there were footprints in some of the sandy portions of the area, we found ourselves now in. Yet there certainly were no cairns, nor could we find a way to get to the end part of the trail a hundred feet or more above us in which we could see a handful of hikers on. By this time, the sun was more on top of us and the temperatures quickly rising. I pulled the phone out of my pocket and easily spotted our mistake. We were on the interior of that loop and after walking around for 30 minutes or so could not figure out how to get that blue dot back on the line marking the trail. Fear and a touch of panic began to settle in. Thankfully, my wife finally located an alternative way out than how we had entered this space which ultimately led us back to a section of the trail we had already covered. With joy in our hearts, we decided simply to follow that blue dot back to the car on the exact line we had previously trod.

Our lives as people of faith are somewhat akin to this story. We need an “app” to guide us. A constant companion that draws us back on to the trail that leads to cool waters and the bread of life when our “dot” veers off course. Of course, we know we have that, and Jesus affirms just who that is, God, his father draws people unto Jesus, the true Bread of Life, came down from heaven.

In life we so often are the tiny blip on the screen in a vast, large world and we like, at times, to try and move that dot down the line all on our own. Yet, a dot is just dot all by itself. Without that line that leads to the end of the trail and the GPS signal that makes that dot move down the trail, the dot on the screen goes nowhere. It needs more to make the app work to its fullest potential and what it was created to be.

Or perhaps think it in this way. Yesterday, several of us rode upon a hayrack pulled by a tractor driven by Curt Casper along the parade route for Hoover's Hometown Days. Now the hayrack on its own is just that. Without the horsepower of the tractor, it wouldn't go anywhere.

Jesus reminds those religious leaders and subsequently us of that fact. Truthfully, this entire passage speaks first and foremost to God's work among God's people. It is God who draws, pulls, drags us to Jesus. It is God who never ceases in this endeavor. It is Jesus, the Son of God, sent from God that will raise us up on the last day. It is God who teaches. It is God who provided manna in the wilderness to the faithful people of Israel and led them into the Promised Land. After wandering into the wilderness (i.e., desert), the prophet Elijah finds himself alone, exhausted, afraid, overwhelmed, and ready to give up. Yet it is God who sends an angel of the Lord telling him to "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey would be too much for him." It is God who supplied a cake or bread and water for the journey. Sustenance for the journey. Guidance to return him back to the path that leads to God. It is God who gave the world the Bread of Life and it is the Bread of Life that will give life to the world as he gives of his flesh. That is, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection.

This passage, the teaching of Jesus that assures us God draws us to him, reminds me of Luther's Small Catechism explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed and the activity of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me hold, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.

Do we have the freedom to accept or reject this understanding? Can we take our eyes off the trail, leave the phone in our pocket leaving us unable to see if our dot is on the line that leads to the Bread of Life? Can we unhook our trailer from the tractor that draws us down the parade route of life? Yes. Elijah left his companion and ventured deep into the desert when he felt he just couldn't go on any longer with the task God had set before him to remind the people of Israel they were seeking life not in God and God's teachings, such as the law, that guided and sustained them, but rather had set their sights on idols or foreign gods that could only provide the bread of death.

We do have a choice, but Jesus reminds us that it is God's choice first to draw us to Godself and to Jesus. It is God's work that pulls us into the church. It is God's work that keeps the church connected to Jesus Christ. God never stops. God has drawn us here this morning, whether in-person or online. God's teaching is what provides the nourishment we need when our souls might be weary. When our body yearns to be fed with the Bread that feeds and fills us eternally, it is Jesus who draws near and assures us we are never alone. Ultimately, it's relationship that is at stake in these Bread of Life passages. The beautiful, loving, life-giving relationship we are invited into with Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the relationship we have with one another, the church on earth.

Daily are we called and given this wonderful opportunity to “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” as Paul reminds the church in Ephesus.

Being drawn into that relationship, feeding on the Bread of Life, results and reveals itself in the ways Paul speaks of: living honest lives, bearing fruit to share with the needy, talk that is useful for building up and words that give grace to those who hear, being kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving one another. This is the life lived from feeding on the Bread that is Jesus. The bread of death we so easily store up, hold onto, and feed into is just the opposite Paul reminds the church: bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, malice, and evil talk. It’s all too easy to let these things consume us, lead our lives, and be the stuff that sits upon our hayracks.

Beloved children, be imitators of God, Paul says. We can only do this because God is the source of our movement toward Jesus, the Bread of Life.

It has been a challenging few weeks for the community of West Branch. Families are in great pain. Grieving, mourning. The sudden, unexpected, and tragic loss of two recent high school graduates, beloved children, and sons of God has shaken these families and their friends. Our young people are hurting. They are shocked, stunned, and I suspect struggling mightily to hear these words of good news and wonder just if the Bread of Life is present. Yet, the Bread of Life has indeed made himself known. God has continued to draw close. People have spoken countless words of love. A community has been present in so many ways. Hugs given. Stories told that not only bring tears but also joyous memories.

A shooting star sent by God reminding us we are not alone and that the light continues to shine even in the darkest of moments. I often wonder why it takes such horrific moments such as this, when one's pain is too much to bear, when all seems lost, when two beautiful souls are lost all too soon, for us to come together and often be the best reflection of the Bread we are filled with as we reach out in love.

I'm not sure. Perhaps, it's because its in moments such as these the Spirit draws us closer to the Bread. Our longing for answers, comfort, healing, and compassion leads us to the nourishment that can only be found in God. Perhaps, it's because God in Christ met the world, revealed to the world, loved the world to it's fullest as the sting of death left God's Son wounded, hanging, bleeding, and dying upon a cross. Yet, in that dark hour when the sun failed to shine, the light broke into the darkness and new life found a way. God drew Jesus from the tomb of death and into the glorious, radiant, and glowing light of life.

Trust in me Jesus says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." Trust in me says Jesus, "I will raise you up on the last day." Abide in me, dwell in me, rest in the relationship I offer, and you will not die, but have eternal life. This we cling to.

Let us pray. O Lord, we pray for the families of Dalyn and Dylan. We pray for all who are grieving the death of a loved one. We pray for our community that is in pain. We pray for our young people who struggle to make sense. We pray for teachers, coaches, and staff that have loved these young men. We pray for healing, mercy, and your presence to be made known.

We pray for your Spirit to continue to call, gather, enlighten, sustain, and instill in us the faith to trust in the promise of everlasting life. Thank you for these two young men. Thank you all who have died and shared so much love, joy, and happiness throughout their lives. Comfort those who mourn and draw us to and fill us with the Bread of Life, the hope for today, tomorrow and every day of this life. Amen.