

Emmanuel Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 11
August 8, 2021
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
What are you looking for?

—John 6:24-35

“What are you looking for?” the father asks his child who is frantically searching the house. “What are you looking for?” the sales-representative asks the confused-looking shopper. “What are you looking for?” the husband asks his wife who is searching on Amazon. “What are you looking for?”

That’s a good question for us to ponder today. I would guess that all of us here today are looking for something in life. But I’m not asking about what you are looking for in the house or in the store or on Amazon. What are you looking for in your spiritual life? Are you looking for comfort? Are you looking for guidance in living your life? Are you looking for peace and security? Are you looking for help in living your life in this world?

What are you looking for? The people in our text for today knew exactly what they were looking for. They were looking for Jesus. Jesus had just fed over five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. It was an amazing miracle that filled their bellies. But as meals usually go, it didn’t sustain them. The crowd wasn’t satisfied with just that evening meal. They wanted more. Jesus knew this so he sent his disciples away from the crowds back across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus then spent some time in prayer with his Father.

Well, that night the crowd went to bed with full stomachs, expecting to see Jesus in the morning. But when they woke, no doubt eager for Jesus to provide them breakfast, they couldn’t find him or his disciples. During the night Jesus had walked across the Sea of Galilee and rejoined the disciples in their boat on the way to Capernaum. When the crowd couldn’t find Jesus, they went searching. They went looking for Jesus. They didn’t just give up and go home, they hunted him down. They too got into boats and sailed back across the Sea of Galilee, looking for Jesus.

That’s kind of amazing, isn’t it? They were looking for Jesus. They aggressively searched for Jesus. It makes me wonder if I have the same determination. Do I aggressively search for Jesus like the crowd? What are you looking for? This crowd knew exactly what they were looking for. They were looking for Jesus.

“Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus” (John 6:24). But their reason for finding him was desperately lacking.

My friends, I pray that you are here today, looking for Jesus, too. I really do. But what are you looking for in Jesus? That’s what I would like to explore with you today.

Jesus reveals for us what they were looking for. “When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill’” (John 6:25,26). Martin Luther didn’t have very flattering words to say about this crowd. He commented that the crowd sought Jesus the way lice seek a scalp. Do you understand his picture? Those tiny bugs love your head and hair because it’s a warm place to lay their eggs. They seek you just to use you.

These people were looking for Jesus just to use Jesus. They wanted something from him. They tenaciously were looking for Jesus because the food they received the day before did not last. They were still hungry. Jesus had given them a free meal, and they wanted more.

Are we ever like that? What are you looking for? Maybe a way to answer that question is to analyze your prayers as of late. What have you been praying for? A nicer house? More cash in the bank account? A new car? Are you looking for Jesus to make you smarter or slimmer? Are you looking for Jesus to make your life easier and better? What are you looking for?

Now, there’s something intriguing about Jesus’ response. He doesn’t chastise the crowd for using him. He doesn’t. What does he chastise them for doing? He chastises them because they weren’t using him to get the one thing they really needed. Jesus said, “Do not work (*literally, do not keep exerting your energy*) for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (He’ll give it to you.) On him (on the Son of Man; Jesus) God the Father has placed his seal of approval” (John 6:27). Keep that last phrase in mind (God placed his seal of approval on Jesus). We’ll come back to it.

Do you see what Jesus is driving at? Jesus could have very easily given them plenty of loaves of bread. In fact, that is what Jesus does do in our lives. In Psalm 145, which was our psalm for today, David writes, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of

every living thing.” We know that everything we have in our lives is given to us from God above. He supplies us with our daily bread. And he invites us to pray to him for all those needs in our lives.

So, what is Jesus’ point? He’s not chastising the people for seeking him for their bodily sustenance. He wants us to look to him for those things. Rather, he chastises them for constantly investing their energy in looking for things that spoil rather than investing their energy in that which will last forever.

I think that’s a good reminder for us, isn’t it? What are you looking for? What are you exerting your energy for? The relationship. The job. The promotion. The spouse. The child. The game. Many things we desire can be good and God-pleasing. Yet how long do they last? And how well do they satisfy? Everything we want in this world just leads to a desire for more. Those things do not fully satisfy. Isn’t that true?

There’s a book entitled “Inside out” by Dr. Larry Crabb. Some of you may have heard me reference this book in the past, but it helped me understand something significant about life. You know what it means to hunger or to thirst, right? Of course, you do. You’ve been there.

To hunger or to thirst means something is missing from your life. You are lacking something. If you are thirsty, you are lacking ... water. If you are hungry, you are lacking ... food.

You long for something. You desire something. So, what do you do? You look for something. You go to the refrigerator or the faucet, right? Everybody with me? It’s pretty straightforward, isn’t it?

Well, Dr. Crabb talks about three types of thirsts or longings or desires that we have in our lives. He calls them “Casual longings, Critical longings, and Crucial longings.”

The casual longings that I have in my life really don’t have a direct impact on other people. For example, I have a desire to have a meaningful job. I desire to have good health. I desire to be a citizen of a nation that protects my freedoms. We long for victories in games and good grades in school. Those are casual longings.

The critical longings are those which have a connection with people. I long for fulfilling relationships. I desire to have a wife who loves me and children who look up to me. I want friends who are there for me. Those are critical longings.

But there is a longing that is much deeper; a thirst which gets to the heart of all other thirsts. What are you looking for? Dr. Crabb calls the deepest longings “crucial longings.” And here is the basic question of those longings: Am I right with God? Am I right with God?

Do you notice what Jesus is doing with his statement? “Do *not keep exerting your energy* for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” Am I right with God? Do I have his approval? When the heavenly Father looks at me, does he smile? Am I right with God? You see, Jesus’ statement actually prompted the people to ask a question.

“What must we do to do the works God requires?” (John 6:28). In other words, how do I get approval with God? Am I right with God? That is the deepest thirst or hunger in every person’s life.

Now, most people will look at how their other longings have been met to answer that question. Am I right with God? “Well, if I have plenty of money and good health and a good job and loving relationships and good friends, well, then, certainly, God must be looking on me with favor. I must be right with God.”

Ah, but what if those things are taken away? What if I lose my health? What if I get cancer? What if I lose my job? What if my country takes away my freedoms? What if I lose my relationships? What if my spouse abandons me or my children forsake me? Have I, then, lost favor with God? What are you looking for?

You see, Jesus cuts right through everything in this life and centers on the heart of the matter. “Do *not keep exerting your energy* for food that spoils (which would be everything in this world), but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. Yes, we receive tremendous blessings from our God with the things of this world. But how do I know that my greatest longing is fulfilled and my deepest thirst is quenched? It’s not by looking to the things of this world which do not last. Jesus said it. “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29).

You see that’s the heart of the gospel, isn’t it? God sent his Son to this world to fill our deepest longings. How do I know with certainty that I am right with God? I look to Jesus, not as an example to follow, not as a bread king who will supply my bodily needs, not as a revolutionist to overturn a nation, but as the Savior-Substitute who has become sin in my place. He came to do what I could not do. He lived a life in perfect conformity to God’s will. God placed his seal of approval on Jesus. He’s the only legitimate one who can make us right with God.

He never pursued his own interest. He came to live and die and rise as the perfect Son of God who gives life to the world. True life. A life of being in a right relationship with God. I am right with God because of Jesus. My deepest longing, hunger, thirst is fulfilled, satisfied, quenched. I need nothing else.

So, what does that mean for all my other longings? The truth is that I still have a lot of longings that aren't fulfilled. I struggle in life. My relationships with others are not perfect. There are certain things that I still long for, hunger for, thirst for. What does it mean when I have those longings in my life?

Well, first of all, it means it's okay to long. It means it's okay to thirst. It means it's okay to hunger. It means I am still desiring something. You see, I will not have perfect relationships with people in this world. There will still be something lacking. I will not have all my desires and wants of things in this world fully fulfilled. There will still be something lacking. I may long to live in a nation that honors and respects God. I may long to have relationships where I am loved and respected. I may desire to have a life with no pain or hardship. But there will always be something lacking.

And that's okay. That's okay. Because we have the deepest hunger satisfied. We have the deepest thirst quenched. Jesus tells us so. He declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). He's talking about our crucial longings. They are met. Am I right with God? Because of Jesus, I am.

So, when your other longings are not met, what can you do? You go to the place that will sustain you to live through them. You go to the Bread of Life who gives you some amazing promises that carry you through the thirsts and longings which are not fully met in this in life.

The big promise, of course, is heaven. Whatever longing you are experiencing right now will not last. I know it won't. Even if it is not taken away while you are journeying through this world, it will be taken away when you leave this world. In heaven, you won't have any wants or longings that are not met. Everything you need will be there. Jesus promises.

But even when you are in this world, Jesus has given you some amazing promises that will strengthen you through these wanting and thirsting times. Even if everybody abandons you, you have a Savior who has said, "I will never leave you." Even if you lose your job and it feels as though you have lost a part of your identity, God says, "You are my child." Such wonderful promises right before you in the Word.

So, my friends, what are you looking for? Jesus may not look fancy. His Word may not look appetizing. Jesus may not give you an easy life. He actually tells you that you will still hunger and thirst and want in this world. But in the end, he comes out of the grave. He covers sin. He conquers death. He gives you peace. He gives you hope. He gives you life.

My friends, my prayer is that God will give you an appetite for Jesus, with all of his mercy, grace, life, and forgiveness. I pray that you hunger for the bread of life. He may not be what you're looking for. No, he's so much more. He's exactly what you need. Amen.