

**“WONDER BREAD”**  
**Exodus 6:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35**  
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Greetings from Vermont! This is only my second visit to Oregon and the first time I have been outside of the city of Portland. Jane and Bob have taken me up to Diamond Lake, where we spent the night, and then on to Crater Lake. On the way back we spent some time watching steelhead in a holding pool. In quite different ways, both were thought-provoking, as well as unforgettable visual experiences. Before we had even left Crater Lake, I had purchased a book on the geology of the Cascades. Your state is quite different from mine, beautiful in a very different way and I am looking forward to seeing more of it.

I live in a very small town in Vermont called Jeffersonville. My church has only 79 members but it has almost everything that a church needs: a steeple with a bell, a sanctuary with an organ, a small meeting room, a kitchen and community room, a Sunday School room, a pastor and an office for the pastor. The reason that I said my church has almost everything it needs is that I am the only paid employee other than a once-a-week cleaning woman. This means that occasionally I am called upon to do such non-pastoral things as repairing a toilet or climbing a ladder to replace a light bulb. If anyone asked me, I would say that we needed at least a very part-time custodian! The church does have a few features that, while not necessary, are nice to have: a good sound system with a tape recorder, an elevator, a carillon, a computer, a copier and a chapel. Jeffersonville likewise has everything that a small town needs: a post office, a bank, a bakery, a library, a church, an elementary school, a hardware store and a general store complete with a liquor store, a butcher, a fax machine, a copier, and it also serves as the drop-off place for the dry cleaner. Three miles away there is a pharmacy and a small medical center. There are two gas station—evidence of one of our country’s addictions—a very competent and active rescue squad, a fire department and a lot of farms. There are also a few features that most small towns do not have: one large art gallery and several smaller ones, a major ski resort which has developed a very active summer tourist business, several very good restaurants, and a hotel.

Many of these places provide for necessities in the daily lives of Jeffersonville’s residents. But a few are frills that enhance our lives but which we could live without, or might be willing to drive further to access, like the art galleries, the fax machine and copier, the liquor store, the butcher, the dry cleaner and the restaurants. The resort is sort of in-between. Although many of Jeffersonville’s residents do use it as a recreational venue, it also serves as a place of part-time or full time employment for many of the town’s adults and young people. Some folks would cut closer to the bone and say that the bank, the medical center, and the library are not necessary to life in a small town. We draw the line in different places depending on our personal habits, values, preferences, and desires. There are some things that we need in order to survive and live our daily lives in a safe, healthy and comfortable way—things that are basic needs. There are other things that enhance our lives and give them meaning and fullness. And there are many more things that we simply enjoy as entertainment, to pass the time of day—or evening: things such as televisions, CD and DVD players and stereo music systems, outdoor barbeque grills, video games

and, maybe for some, boats, motor homes, snowmobiles, ATV's, or hot air balloons. I don't mean to be exhaustive in my details. The point I want to make is that we have "needs" and we have "wants," and the line between them is constantly shifting. There was a time not too long ago when there were no cell phones. Today a cell phone may be a necessity for some people, a convenience for most people, and a frill for a few people. In my lifetime, many, many things have gone from being a "want" to being a "need" (or at least thought of as a need!), depending on our age and stage of life, our employment, our physical condition, and our economic situation.

Most of the ordinary, middle class people in this country today have more than they need. Please don't misunderstand me. I do not mean that there are no people who are needy. There are many—an unacceptably large number for the richest and most powerful country in the world! But most of us, you and I, have everything we need and then some. Our lives reflect the abundant grace of our God. But, are we satisfied? Are we happy? Or are we like the crowd that followed Jesus to Capernaum looking for more of the free lunch that he gave them yesterday, when he distributed that small boy's loaves and fishes among them? They were hungry again and, like the people of Israel described in this morning's reading from Exodus, they were looking for bread from heaven. Jesus says to them, "*Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.*" He is telling them that he has more to offer than a free lunch. He is telling them that when their needs have been met, more of the same will not make them happier. You cannot accumulate happiness. Like the manna God gave to the People of Israel, it perishes if you try to save it. That is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray the words, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*"

If we each become what God intends us to be, our daily needs will be met—we will have our daily bread. In the well-known passage from the Gospel of Matthew about the lilies of the field, Jesus tells us that God will care for us, as he does the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. We are to concentrate on seeking the kingdom of God and, in doing so, our needs will be met – our needs not necessarily our wants.

You may protest that this is not the way things are in the real world; that the needs of all are not met; that there are many who are hungry and homeless, with many basic needs unmet. I will answer that I believe that God has provided enough for all of humankind but that we have not done a very good job of seeing that it is distributed justly and adequately. While God is present to each of us individually and responds in many ways to our individual needs and crises, the Kingdom of God manifests itself only in a communal sense. It is not, and will not be, available for some and not for others. I believe that the Kingdom of God will not come to any of us until it comes for all of us; and furthermore, by telling us to seek the kingdom of God, Jesus is telling us that we are in some way responsible and instrumental in its coming. He does not tell us that we do not have to do anything about our own needs, only that we should not worry about them but that, in seeking the kingdom of God, we do need to worry about, and do something about, the needs of others. Jesus does not spell out just how we are to walk this narrow line but he certainly gives us lots of clues, and today's gospel reading is one of them. "*Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.*" I believe he was saying that we should work to meet our own needs, however each of us determines what we need, but that we should not seek more than we need until the needs of all have been met. I believe that is what he meant

by seeking the kingdom of God. While each of us may define our needs differently, we should not confuse “needs” with “wants.” “Need” is a limiting concept. “Want” is an open-ended concept.

The entire economy in our country is based on wanting more than we need. I am certainly not an economist. I have never even taken a course, or read a book, devoted solely to economics. But the way I understand it, our national economy, in order to be sustained, requires that we consume more goods and services each year. If those of us who are fortunate enough to already have all that we need are to continue to consume more each year, then we must continually want more than we need. And this is the job of the advertising industry in all of its manifestations. Having our needs met, even our own individually defined needs, does not satisfy us because our culture is always telling us that we need more, and we are believing that. The extreme example is the corporate executive. There are a number of names that I could mention, but you know them already—who makes a salary in the millions of dollars, who already owns several very expensive homes complete with all the amenities and technological wizardry, several sports cars and perhaps a private jet, plus much, much more. Certainly his—or maybe one of these days “her” – needs, in the eyes of all of us, have been met. But in his, or her, eyes there are needs so pressing that they are driven to lying, deceit, corruption, and criminal behavior in order to possess the food which perishes and ultimately destroys the inherent integrity and value of their own life as well as the lives of their family and untold numbers of their employees. There seems to be no end to what is desired, no limit to the need to have more, nothing that ultimately will satisfy their hunger. When “wants” are mistaken for “needs,” there is often a complete breakdown in an individual’s values, priorities, and sense of responsibilities.

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, I am going to rain bread from heaven for you and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.”* The people did not follow God’s instructions. They tried to gather more manna than enough for one day and it rotted. Jesus said: *“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.”* The crowd asks Jesus to give them bread today as he did yesterday. But he points out that they ate that bread yesterday and are hungry again today. Come to me, he tells them, because *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”* Jesus is inviting us to be in relationship with him. I hasten to add that not everyone’s needs are the same, and it is often difficult to define another’s need. But those of us who can define our own needs within reason will know when they have been met, if we are also seeking the kingdom of God through our relationship in Jesus Christ. When our hunger is satisfied, we will not need to work for the food that perishes but we will be freed to help others meet their needs and satisfy their hunger with the food that endures.

Attached to the back of the hotel in Jeffersonville is a bakery. It is called simply “The Bakery.” If you tell someone to meet you for coffee at the bakery, no one has to ask “which bakery” or “what bakery.” The bread which we will share at the communion table this morning comes from The Bakery. I often go there for coffee or lunch. Only a countertop separates the eating area from the bakery kitchen. I sit at the counter and watch Mary, the baker, work on the bread. After the dough has risen, she tears off loaf sized pieces and throws them down on a large wooden table. Then she kneads each one, rolling it,

pummeling it, turning it, and punching it. It is hard work. Each loaf represents hands-on individual human effort, in addition to the growing and providing of the ingredients. As I sat last week and watched Mary fold and pummel that dough, I thought of Jesus' words, "*I am the bread of life.*" This bread that I bring you from Vermont is good bread. It is nourishing and it is tasty. It represents many things – the body of Christ which is the church, my church, and your church. When it has been blessed and broken, it will become the symbol of Jesus' body, given for us, and of our life together in Christ, a life that must be shared with all of God's people if His kingdom is ever to become a reality. This morning we will share from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific Coast, from the Green Mountains of Vermont to the Cascades of Oregon, from the Lamoille River to the Willamette River, the food that endures for eternal life, real Wonder Bread. Jesus said: "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" May we all learn to discern what are our "needs" and what are our "wants," so that we do not find ourselves working endlessly for the food that perishes. Amen.