



August 1, 2021, Worship Sermon
" Manna at the Phillies "
Delivered by Rev. Stephen Keiser

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

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."

I went to the Phillies game on Monday night. It was Dollar Dog Night. That means that you could eat as many hot dogs as you wanted for a dollar a piece. Now, compared to the exorbitant price that you normally pay for a hot dog at Citizens Bank Park, a dollar a hot dog sounds like really good deal. But the fact is, hot dogs are inexpensive food. You can get a hot dog and bun for less than forty cents a piece at the grocery store. So, the Phillies weren't exactly giving food away. Nevertheless, the allure of dollar hot dogs was enough to coax tens of thousands of Phillies fans to wait in long lines at the concession stands in order to fill their bellies with a food that - like the manna in the wilderness - could be called "What is it?" since no one knows for sure what goes into hot dogs.

By the fifth inning, the lines at the concession stands had died down and all the satiated fans had settled into their seats to watch the game. So, I was surprised when all the people in the stands around me jumped to their feet, started waving their hands above their head, and shouting. Had I missed a home run? I wondered. Then I saw hot dogs raining down from above. I turned around to see the source of the commotion and there, in the balcony above me, was the Phillie Phanatic and Smiley that Hatfield Pig. They were throwing hot dogs into the crowd below. I guess they had some leftovers that they were trying to get rid of. And the people in the crowd were waving and crying out in the hope that a hot dog might be thrown toward them.

So much about this scene amazed me. First of all, there was just something odd about a pig throwing hot dogs at people... like, isn't that a bit cannibalistic from the pig's perspective? But also, I found it strange that after eating so many dollar hot dogs anyone in the stands would have any interest in eating any more, even if they were free.

Then I realized: this was not about the hot dogs. Nobody cared about the hot dogs. This was about people participating in a ritual... a ritual that gave them joy and excitement. For many of us, this was the first time since the beginning of the pandemic that we had been in any kind of crowd. Rooting for the Phillies drew us together and gave us something in common. At the stadium, we develop a team spirit and a sense that we are connected with something bigger than ourselves. And the hot dogs raining down on us from heaven: to catch one would have certainly felt like a blessing.

When I thought about the joy and excitement displayed by those fans at the Phillies game, I wondered if those same emotions were not possible when we gather to share this meal. If people could get so excited about receiving a free hot dog from a guy in a pig costume, what could make us equally excited about receiving the bread of life from the hand of Christ?

Obviously, there are some significant differences between what happens here and what happens at a Phillies game. When we gather in this place, what draws us together is not our love for an athletic team, but our love for the Kingdom of God. We are not here in the hope of seeing our team beat someone else's team; we are here in the hope of seeing a world without tribalism... a world where conflict and war give way to peace and justice.

Part of what made catching a hot dog tossed by the Philly Phanatic exciting was that not everyone would get one. To catch a hot dog would feel like one was singled out for a blessing. The goal of this meal is that everyone should receive a blessing. I find it wonderful that in this meal everyone receives. And that feeling is even more pronounced when we all receive from one loaf and all drink from one cup. In a world that presses us to differentiate ourselves from each other, this meal encourages us to see how we all hunger for the same thing: we hunger for love and reconciliation.

And the one who gives us our meal at this table is not a corporate mascot. The one who gives us this bread is the one who rained down manna upon the liberated slaves in the wilderness. We celebrate this meal, just like our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate the Passover meal, to remind ourselves that God has delivered us from slavery to sin and death.

And finally, the food that we share in this meal is not processed meat laden with preservatives to keep it from perishing. The bread that we share comes from grain gathered from the fields and the cup that we share comes from grapes gathered from vineyards. But when we share this bread and share this cup, we believe Christ becomes present to us in this meal. Christ gives himself to us in this meal so that when we eat it, we are truly eating the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We are becoming one with Christ and one with everyone who is in Christ.

I realize that not everyone at this point is comfortable gathering inside for worship. The church has always made accommodations for those who could not be present to receive the Lord's Supper: bread and wine from this meal are sent to those who are absent. I'm speaking now primarily to those who are gathered with us online: if you would like to receive the Lord's Supper, please call the church so that we can set up a time for me to bring it to you.

May our sharing of this meal inspire us to live for a day when all our hunger and all our thirst are satisfied by the One who gives himself for us.