

I AM The Bread of Life
John 6:35-51
Revelation 21:5-6

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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February 18, 2018 (Lent I)

John 6:35-51

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. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Revelation 21:5-6

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

Jesus says that he is the bread of life, come down from heaven. Whoever comes to him will never be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty. Immediately some of the people who hear him start complaining: "How can he say he has come down from heaven, when we know his parents and we've known him since he was a little kid? And what does he mean about the bread of life?"

But we readers know the answer to that. We know from the prologue to John's Gospel that Jesus is the Word of God, who was in the beginning with God and who is God, come into

the world.¹ Jesus teaches these people that everyone who is drawn to him is drawn by the Father, and that those who believe in him have eternal life.

Jesus explains that he is the bread of life, and he compares himself to manna. You remember manna? When the Hebrew people were in the wilderness, after they had left Egypt and before they got to the Promised Land, God sent them manna every day, six days a week. On Friday morning, there was twice as much manna, so that they did not have to either work or go hungry on the sabbath.

Manna appeared on the ground each morning with the dew, and it was kind of like flatbread, maybe tortillas, or pita bread, or naan. The people ate it every day. It was a staple of their diet. It was their daily bread. They depended on it. Eventually they got so tired of it that they complained about it. But still, manna and wild quail and whatever else they found sustained them through forty years in the wilderness. The Hebrew people kept a piece of fossilized manna in the Ark of the Covenant as proof, centuries later, that these events had actually happened. When you consider that the only other thing they kept there were the broken tablets of the Ten Commandments, that shows how important manna was.

Jesus explains to these people that their ancestors ate the manna, and they eventually died. The manna appeared on earth to be their daily bread, and that was amazing, but that's all it was. It was a temporary solution: enough to sustain them for the time being, but not enough to give them eternal life.

Jesus is better than manna. Jesus is the bread of heaven, given so that those who eat it will have eternal life. I make a reference to this every time we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when we are about to eat the bread. Every time, I hold up a piece of bread and I

¹ John 1:1-2.

say to you, “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.” Every time, I am reminding you of what Jesus said here, that those who eat of Christ’s body will have eternal life.

Now, we do not believe that the bread is a magic item out of a fairy tale. Christ’s presence in the bread is spiritual, rather than physical or chemical. A scientist would not be able to tell the difference between bread that a minister has blessed and bread that he or she has not. But that does not make Christ’s presence any less real. Christ’s presence is in the bread and it is in the people gathered for this symbolic meal.

Bread is important. On one level in this story, bread stands for food in general. All through history, bread has been the staple food for workers. A pound of bread a day was considered about right for the slaves who built the Pyramids, and for the soldiers who built Roman roads, and for the serfs who built medieval cathedrals.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for God to give us our daily bread. Not necessarily enough for next week, but enough for today.

Jesus has just used five loaves of ordinary bread, with a couple fish, to feed five thousand people! Jesus used bread to express God’s love and taking care of all those people. And now he says that he is the bread of the world. The world will indeed chew him up, and he goes willingly.

But there is another level to this story². To really understand how important Jesus as the Bread of Life is, you have to understand bread, and its place in Middle Eastern cultures, particularly at this time. In the West, and particularly in the United States, we’re used to thinking of bread as a meal starter. It’s on the table in the restaurant, as a starter or a side. It’s does not

² David W. Hull, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospel*, John I, 195-199.

even get the dignity of being called a side dish. It is something you can take or leave. Many people, especially those who are dieting, will leave it. This cultural difference makes this image fail, because one thing that Jesus is certainly not, is an optional dinner roll.

No, to understand what Jesus is saying here, you have to picture a Middle Eastern dinner table. You sit down, or you recline, but that's another sermon...³

You come to the table, and you are served a bowl of food, but you don't see a fork, or a spoon, or a knife. What you have is flatbread, kind of like tortillas, or pita bread, or naan, ... or manna. You tear off a piece of this flatbread and dip it into the bowl and use it to pick up food and bring it to your mouth. At the Last Supper, Jesus explains that the one who will betray him is the one who is sharing a bowl with him, literally dipping bread into the same bowl to eat.⁴

So, when Jesus explains that he is the Bread of Life, I picture this conversation taking place, like so many deep conversations, at the dinner table, at the home of some local notable. Jesus holds up a piece of bread in his hand, and says that he is the Bread of Life.

His listeners, having that context, would have understood something that we do not necessarily get from merely reading a dry account of the conversation. They would have understood that he was saying that abundant, eternal life exists, no matter what they say or do. In the prologue, John says that "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." They would have understood that, without Jesus, though, they are unable to take hold of that life, and enjoy it.

So, what does this mean for us?

³ At a Greco-Roman dinner table, diners would not have sat in chairs; they would have reclined on their left sides, with their heads at the low three-part table (or *triclinium*), and their feet back, away from the table. This was the fashion in Roman-occupied Judea at the time of Christ.

⁴ Mark 14:20.

It means that Jesus brought abundant, eternal life with him when he came down here. That is the main course, if you will, of life.

It means that we need to hold on to Jesus in order to enjoy that main course of life.

There are many other things on the table. Power, worldly success, pleasure, comfort, and wealth are all on the table. You can have any or all of them without ever touching the bread, or the main course.

These things taste sweet. They have good texture. But they are short-lived. It is easy to fill up on them. We see people doing that all the time. That is like filling up on snacks and dessert, and ignoring the main course. It is tempting, but ultimately childish. It will leave you feeling first bloated, and then empty.

If you fill up on junk, you will miss out on the main course of life, the abundance for all eternity that Jesus brought with him for all humanity. You will miss out on the only thing on the table that is, in the long run, worth having.

We are not able to get that main course on our own, any more than it would really work to eat hot stew with our fingers. But, with Jesus and through Jesus, the main course is offered to each of us.

Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I ask God to send us out into the world, to be Christ's Body in the world. We can't give other people that abundant life that never ends. It comes from God. But we can show them how to get it.

We can show them Jesus. It's like teaching someone at that Middle Eastern table how to use the flatbread to eat their food.

We can show them with our words, but it works better to show them with our actions. It works even better to show them with our whole lives.

Pay attention to that Bread of Life. Because it is through the Bread of Life that you can take into yourself the life that never ends.

AMEN.