



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – AUGUST 12, 2018
1 KINGS 19:4-8; PSALM 34:1-8; EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2; JOHN 6:35, 41-51

BREAD OF LIFE

JOHN 6:35, 41-51: *[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.”*

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.”]

My sister Theresa back East moved to a small, modest apartment complex for people over 55, and she is surely the youngest one there by over a decade. In their travels from laundry room to mail room, to schlepping groceries, and brushing snow off their cars, she became fast friends with an upstairs neighbor, Pat, who is well into his 80s, and they help each other out, check on each other, keep each other company watching “Dancing with the Stars.” And Theresa always fixes a dinner plate for him, of whatever she has cooked for herself and her

daughter – and she is a great cook – and sometimes he eats with them, or she brings a plate up to him, because he does not cook at all. I don’t know how long Pat has lived in that apartment building with no nearby family, but his utter delight is getting a home-made dinner plate with hot bread on the side from my sister, his friend. He laughs and tells me it has changed his life!

And so, a frail, quiet woman named Edith lives two doors down from my sister, and, having watched

this friendship, one day she got up her nerve and asked how much it would **cost** for her to get a home-cooked dinner, because she couldn't cook any more, but maybe just once or twice a week, as she didn't really have much money. So Theresa, who also doesn't have much money, immediately began providing dinners for Edith, too—not for a cost. And now she also checks on Edith each morning to make sure she's okay and has taken her pills, and calls the doctor for her, because Edith can't hear him on the phone, and helps her put on her special socks in the morning. Edith, too, laughs and tells me, when I visit, that Theresa has changed her life.

With food...that brings more. Because the bread that nourishes the heart and soul, that is dished out as real care, nourishes whole lives. Feeding the body, yes, is of fundamental importance. But the bread of life is more. It tastes like home-cooked when you've been having frozen dinners; it fills the lonely room where you've been watching TV all by yourself and soothes the place that's afraid no one will even know if you can't get out of bed this morning. It is nourishment that changes everything. According to Pat and Edith.

And you and I know that kind of bread, too, the nourishment that is more than carbs; it is giving of oneself – and it is life-giving. We bake that kind of bread for each other, each in our own ways. And we continually hunger for that kind of bread.

Jesus knows these hungers. Right before today's Gospel reading, in this chapter six of John, Jesus has fed the five thousand, who would have gone hungry. But even with food miraculously left over from five loaves and two fishes, he knows they, and we, need

deeper, lasting nourishment. That's what he's here doing.

"I am the bread of life," he says. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

"Never" is a big claim, and the people wonder what he's talking about. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus uses seven profound "I Am" statements, and this is the first, revealing to us **who he is** in this vivid metaphor of being human. Bread **is** life. But life in Jesus is even more; it is the **fullness** of life.

The Rt. Rev. Bill Swing, former Bishop of California, said, "There's a hunger beyond food that's expressed in food, and that's why feeding is always a kind of miracle. It speaks to a bigger desire."¹

The bigger desire is the draw to the holy, the loving call of the Spirit that beckons every single one of us, God's beloved children, to connection. Christianity has tended, for over-long millennia, to read into John's Gospel "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" as some kind of exclusionary, insidious rule. But think about the Gospels. Jesus is continually in relationship with the stranger, the outcast, the poor, the undesirable. And in the Gospel of John, references to "the world" are euphemism for those who won't accept, can't understand who Jesus is. But Jesus says, in the passage from John that we read today, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Not the life of the few; the life of the world.

Jesus showed in his interactions with all kinds of people that the God who loves us draws us all. It is

in responding to that call that we in turn draw closer to recognizing the Spirit that is already present with each of us. And the Bread of Life nourishes us on the journey.

Bread is simple, bread is what everyone eats. And Jesus, coming to us as the Bread of Life, didn't draw barriers around the people he would eat with, or the people he fed. That miracle of multiplication of loaves and fishes was seen as a sign of his divinity, sure. But the real sign there is even bigger.

Sara Miles, in her book *Jesus Freak*, writes, "Winding up at the shore of a lake without ritually pure food of their own would have made believers anxious. And eating in the company of people of unknown moral and religious character would have made everyone even more unsettled. But Jesus consistently chose unconventional table fellowship as the sign of God's kingdom. And so faced with a crowd of five thousand, he drives home the message he's been preaching – about the spiritual unimportance of religious and social barriers – by inviting everyone to share a meal on the spot. It is hands-on learning. Do this, Jesus says, and you'll taste what life in the kingdom of God is like."²

And it tastes like life in Jesus. He says, I AM the bread, offered as barrier-breaking radical hospitality. Somehow, though, we're STILL confounded by that inclusivity!

Yet we come here today to be nourished in this most holy and yet ordinary of acts: eating and drinking – all together, in this sacred mystery, this gift of Jesus. *For though we are many, we all share one bread and one cup.* Jesus didn't give us an

esoteric ritual with an alchemist's elements, reserved for a cultish few. He invited us all to the ordinary table, with the ordinary staples of wheat and vine, and gave to us all the extraordinary, miraculous gift of his own self to share and share in. Here we are together; the Eucharist is communal; the Bread of Life is shared.

When I was with our Evensong Choir at St. Paul's Cathedral in London last month, I had the very sweet opportunity to bear the chalice. Because St. Paul's is such a major visitor destination, many, many, many of the people who came to communion had clearly never received before. Person after person came up to me holding the bread gingerly in their fingers, with wide eyes full of question and wonder. I would gesture to them to go ahead and eat it, and then offer the cup. I was so moved by that crystal moment of being with someone who perhaps had always wondered about this sacred ritual, hungering, or maybe didn't even know what to think, but felt drawn to the altar. And I hear Jesus in the Gospel today: "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me." And all of them, all of us, were drawn to the Bread of Life, because we all have the love of the Father/Mother/Creator.

In a few minutes, at this altar we will hear those sacramental words: "Do this in remembrance of me." But for Christians, "do this" doesn't just mean *eat* bread; it means BECOME the bread we eat. When we're nourished by the Bread of Life, we are called to go forth as Christians and be bread and life to the world, too.

That's what we come here for. LIFE in Jesus Christ. For the nourishment that doesn't just fill, but

fulfills. And why we *need* to keep coming, and then GOING – going out into the world, filled with the life of Christ, to share and to nourish every Pat and Edith we come in contact with, in turn. This is the heart of the inbreaking Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. It is a promise of joy in the midst of our culture of running on empty, in an era of running scared.

I am the Bread of Life. It was heard as a challenge to our reasoning – how can this be so, Jesus? But what if we instead really, truly, experience it not so much as a proclamation, but as a promise? A wonderful promise, because Jesus tells us that the Father draws the world to him! That if we come to Jesus, we will no longer have such hunger for perishable things, endlessly unfilled; in Jesus we will have everything. And THEN, in our fulfilledness, we can *give* everything.

*Oh, miraculous thing,
This body of God will nourish
Even the poorest, most humble of servants.*

...from *Panis angelicus*, verse penned by Thomas Aquinas back in the 13th century:

The bread of angels becomes the bread for humankind.

The heavenly bread is the end of all signs.

Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

*Panis Angelicus fit panis hominum
Dat Panis caelicus figuris terminum
O res mirabilis, manducat Dominum
Pauper, pauper, servus et humilis
Pauper, pauper, servus et humilis*

¹ Unitarian Universalist Association, Worshipweb Collection, accessed August 9, 2018 at

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/hunger>.

² Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 2010. P. 25.



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