



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 11, 2024
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.".]*

When I was growing up, our custom was to have dinner together as a family whenever possible. My siblings and I often recount that time, remembering stories, friendly quizzes, and favorite or not-so-favorite meals shared around that table. In our memory, there's one small thing that holds a special place. It was our father's little ritual at the end of the meal, which he called "topping off." Each night our mom would prepare Pepperidge Farm club rolls – which she'd toast to golden perfection, just the way my dad liked. And every night, he'd do the same thing – saving the very last bite of his roll for the end. When

he'd finished everything else, he'd spread it with the last dab of butter and a little jam – and then he'd take a moment to savor this last bite. This is how he topped off the meal, and over the years, we learned to follow this little practice. Now, to someone unfamiliar with our dinner routine, this would seem unremarkable. But to those observing closely, it was a moment which somehow pulled us all together – with the major work of the day completed, good food and company shared, we were all centered together, even if just for this tiny slice of time. Then my dad would put his hands on the

table, slide his chair back, and we were ready to move on.

While I don't want to romanticize it, there was clearly something life-giving and life-affirming about this small practice that has kept this memory so vivid for my siblings and me.

This morning, I begin with thanks to Canon Wyels for his preaching over the past two weeks. As he mentioned, we're immersed now in a five-week series of Gospel lections from the apostle John, focusing on Jesus as the bread of life. We began with the feeding of the five thousand and progressed to a conversation between Jesus and some of those who'd been in the crowd he'd miraculously fed as they came to him looking for further signs and perhaps some more bread to eat. We ended last week's reading with the same verse we began with today – John 6:35, in which 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.” I'd like to spend some time looking closely at these central words – “I am the bread of life” – to ponder more deeply what Jesus meant, both for his day and ours.

I am the bread of life. If you were hearing this for the first time, it might seem like kind of an odd way of describing oneself. It implies we already know the association between bread and life, or at least what it meant to Jesus and those around him.

So, first, some context: This declaration is one of the series of “I AM” statements unique to John's Gospel, which includes other well-known descriptions such as I am the Good Shepherd; I am the light of the world; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the true vine; and I am resurrection and life. This formulation of “I AM” takes us back to the book of Exodus, where God identifies Godself to Moses as “I am who I am,” or “I am the one who is” (Exodus 3:14). Some scholars question whether the “I AM” statements penned by John are actually Jesus' own words or were shaped by memories of John and his community, expressed long after Jesus' death and resurrection. Whatever the source, these statements represent how John and his companions understood Jesus, his teaching, the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. And also the impact of the resurrected Jesus they had observed on those who believed and followed the Way of Christ in the earliest years of the Church.¹

Most importantly, Jesus' declarations of “I AM” – including “I am the bread of life” – link him to God's own self-declaration and point to Jesus' direct knowledge of and relationship with God.

John spends significant time in his Gospel on Jesus' self-revelation as the Bread of Life. This phrase is very familiar, maybe so familiar that we don't really give it much thought. And when we *do* stop to consider it, it might seem just odd to us, in our time, that

¹ William Barclay, *Introduction to John and the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 118-119.

Jesus would identify with something so ordinary and uninspiring as bread. What's up here?

The choice of bread, ordinary as it might sound, is intentional. Like the "I AM" formulation, bread was a very familiar image to the Jewish people. It carried deep association with the manna given by God to the Israelites in the wilderness, who'd wondered how and when they were going to be fed. Manna was a potent symbol of God's generosity, God's faithfulness to the people, and response to those in need (as undeserving as they might have sounded in the moment). C.H. Dodd writes that, in later rabbinic tradition, the renewal of the gift of manna became a fixed feature of Jewish expectations for the end-times.² This meant that manna – or bread – would be an exceptionally meaningful symbol of divine generosity and deliverance among the people surrounding and now questioning Jesus.

Likewise, in our first reading today, we heard the story of the prophet Elijah – who, at this point, was fleeing the wrath of Queen Jezebel after he defeated the prophets of Baal in favor of Yahweh. Elijah now is at the end of his strength, unsure how he can survive one more day, with a death sentence hanging over him. Yet in this fraught moment, God provides for him. Elijah is awakened from exhausted sleep by an angel who points him to the small cake of bread on the stones beside him. He's unsure at first, but with the angel's

encouragement, he eats and is renewed, strengthened, able to move forward – not just for a day but for 40 days, thanks to the extraordinary gift of ordinary bread, given to sustain and nourish him for the journey ahead.

Now, I appreciate that bread might not be a welcome part of everyone's current food list. At the same time, it's a potent symbol, tangible, elemental, a staple item in most cultures. We can clearly imagine the process of kneading dough, the smell of baking bread, the way it feels in our mouth. It's familiar, it's universal, and at the same time it's so diverse in its forms: French baguette, German rye, Japanese milk bread, Middle Eastern flatbread, Ethiopian injera, Latin American tortilla, Indian naan, and so on... *so* many forms and flavors. Something for everyone to connect with! So, what does it mean for Jesus to identify himself with bread to describe how he stands at the nexus of God and God's people, then and now?

Consider this: He stood among them and in our remembrance as the incarnate one – enfleshed, made of blood and bone as they were and we are. Incarnate, relatable, familiar in form, able to be seen, heard, touched, one who nourished others by his very presence and his healing word. An "ordinary" man who was clearly extraordinary in that presence and in his own embodiment of relationship with God. Embodiment of the Word/Logos/Wisdom.

² C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 335.

Embodied ability to feed others on every level, to satisfy the deep hunger of people's hearts and minds for connection, reconciliation, renewed relationship with the Creator.

All of this, not only for those around him 2,000 years ago, but for all of us who yearn, who are willing to draw close, to listen and learn, and to receive him in the center of our being. In our heart and in our very gut.

That's what it means for Jesus to be living bread, living and present to us ongoing. He is the bread of life because he's grounded in God's vision and will, which are fully centered in LIFE! And because he meets us in all the circumstances of our lives, wherever we are, up and down, moving and still.

When we partake of Jesus as the bread of life, he sustains us and assuages our hunger. He walks with us as we discern the questions of our lives. He consoles and replenishes us when we are hurt or exhausted. As he did for the Israelites and Elijah, he refreshes and strengthens us for the journey ahead, however difficult that path will be. He ultimately reconciles us through the sacrifice of his own life, his own flesh, which we remember each time we gather and give thanks in the Eucharist. And he invites and draws us into living community with God and one another, to live into our own call, according to our gifts.

Perhaps we can hear "I am the bread of life" as "I am the bread FOR life." Not only for our individual lives and relationships with God, but beyond that for the benefit and blessing of ALL God's people and for Creation itself.

As the writer of the letter to the Ephesians reminds us, we've received the gifts of God's forgiveness, Jesus' example and offering of love, and the Holy Spirit's seal that binds us as members of the Body of Christ. We are now to be imitators of God, to live and love as Christ loved us, to nourish and lift one another up with words of grace and acts of kindness, to open ourselves to forgive and be reconciled rather than divided in anger. What timely words for us all, indeed! These are the ways that we can share the bread of life that we have received, to take the gifts given and share them outwardly so that love can multiply to feed the world. In giving ourselves to follow his example, Jesus points the way to eternal life.

"I am the bread of life," proclaimed Jesus. As we open our lives to follow him, he takes us from something ordinary and seemingly insignificant on the surface to something life-giving, life-sharing, life-changing. With confidence in this, we pray: Gracious God, give each of us this day our daily bread, your bread of life, manifest for us in the love of the risen Christ. Help us to recognize and share this gift with others in the fullness of that love. May we receive this with gratitude as the source and seed of new life that you envision and desire for us all. Amen.