



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“I am the Bread of Life”
Scripture – John 6:24-35
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 5, 2018

There are things that make life possible and there are things that make life worth living. Food and water and shelter make human existence possible, but what makes life sweet and beautiful and rich? Today’s text may hold the clues.

If you were listening closely as our lay reader began the scripture reading, it sounds as if we are in the middle of an extended story, and indeed we are. If we flipped the page back to the first verse of chapter six, we would read the familiar account of Jesus feeding the five thousand with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. After providing this outdoor picnic for an overflow crowd, Jesus crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Our story picks up the narrative the following day when large numbers of the well-fed crowd hopped into boats, shoved off from shore, and went searching for Jesus. They find him on the opposite shore.

Why were these people in hot pursuit of Jesus? Were they craving for more of the mouth-watering bread Jesus had given them the day before? I suspect many of them were. Were they puzzled about the way Jesus had produced such an abundance of food and curious to see if he could pull that off again? I suspect some of them were.

However, a few folks may have been tailing him for another reason. Perhaps they wanted to go deeper. I suspect there was at least a handful who perceived a hunger in their souls that no quantity of food could satisfy, but they had an intuition that Jesus could.

I wonder if our soul – our spiritual essence – is like a fine old house. It can be a comforting place to be, like when we gather around the dining room table for a feast with family and friends. It can be a warm and inviting place, like in the summer when we inhale the fragrance of the flowers in the backyard, or on a cold winter night when we sit near the fireplace. It can be a safe place, like when we curl up in our favorite chair with a book.

But make no mistake. An old house – like a soul – needs constant work. Just when you finish painting and furnishing the bedrooms, there is a leak in one of the faucets. Once the plumbing is fixed and you begin to relax, you discover that you need to put on a new roof. And what about the basement? It’s too scary to even venture down there! But we ignore it at our peril. Sooner or later troubles will surface.

What might be rumbling around in the basement of your being? What might be stirring in the cellar of your soul? Anxiety over your child or your job or the number of years you have remaining? Sadness over the death of a loved one or the breakup of a relationship? Guilt over a damaging mistake you made? Envy of someone who has more

than you do? Despair over – fill in the blank – racism, violence, global warming, homophobia, the current political situation, drugs... Or maybe you can't quite pin it down. You simply feel empty.

If you are aware of your interior landscape and what could use some attention, you may be able to identify with some of the seekers in today's passage. Jesus says to them, "I know that you have come looking for me because your stomachs were growling and I filled them with plenty of tasty food yesterday. Do not allow your physical hunger to overshadow your deeper craving. Seek the food that sticks with you and nourishes you day after day.

Puzzled, because Jesus began to speak about bread metaphorically, some are still focused on physical sustenance. They ask for something akin to what their ancestors experienced when God used Moses to liberate them from slavery. When their forbearers sojourned in the wilderness, God provided them with manna. When they were stumbling around in a dry, rocky wilderness wondering if they would have another meal, God provided what they needed to survive and the energy to keep moving forward.

Now, 1200 years later in the time of Jesus, the people beg him – their new Moses – to provide daily bread. Jesus says he'll do Moses one better and lavish them with sustenance for their souls. He says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

They begged for warm, buttery yeast rolls like grandma used to make. He offered them himself – a window into the heart of God.

Episcopal priest, Lauren Winner writes: "In calling himself 'the bread of life,' — and not, say, crème caramel or caviar — Jesus is identifying with basic food, with sustenance, with the food that, for centuries afterward, would figure in the protest efforts of poor and marginalized people. No one holds caviar riots; people riot for bread. So to speak of God as bread is to speak of God's most elemental provision for us."¹

Do you feel that Jesus is elemental provision? "Not appetizer, not dessert, not occasional-dietary-supplement, but essential, everyday food without which you will starve?"²

Louisa Hulett is a political science professor who was raised in the church, left, and ultimately came back. Here is why she returned: "I was a prodigal child who wandered away from God. I had no time for God. I was busy with my life and preoccupied with career advancement. Hanging on to a passing acquaintance with a blurry, generic God, I attended church until college. But my weak and passive faith was no match for the skepticism, intellectual arrogance and blissfully self-gratifying life style I learned and embraced in college. After college, I studied hard, earned my PhD (my first idol) and started teaching international relations...I wrote several articles and books (publications, my second idol) and was well received in the classroom...I earned tenure (my third idol) and received the acclaim of being a big fish in a small pond. I controlled my fate, or so I thought."

"My other passion was sports... I loved to win... As a successful person, I could live the way I wanted to... Despite this great life, however, I began to feel that something was missing. Career and sports were not enough. I still hated to lose, but winning and succeeding offered no joy... I was questioning the value of life. What was my purpose? Why was there a universe?...I began to do some serious soul-searching. I realized that I was very far from God and was missing out on something (vital)."³

Jesus urges his followers to think about him in a way that is analogous to eating a piece of bread. He invites us to chew on his teachings and ministry. He wants his wisdom and action not to remain outside of us as something we ponder, but rather as something that enters into our mind, our heart, and our soul, so that Jesus becomes a part of who we are.

Our passage reminds us that we can overindulge in food and drink, and still have a gnawing emptiness within us. As flour and yeast mixed with water, kneaded into dough, and baked into a savory loaf can satisfy our physical hunger pains, Jesus, the bread of life, can satisfy our deepest yearnings. If you are wracked by anxiety, the bread of life can produce in you a calm serenity; if you carry a burden of guilt, the bread of life can insure a liberating forgiveness; if you are weighed down by sadness, you can recover a spirit of joy; if you feel hollow, you can find a sense of purpose; if you fear death, you can receive hope of eternal life.

Your presence in worship demonstrates that you get it. You understand that we are more than physical creatures. We are also spiritual beings. Further, you know that despite our culture's constant clamoring about the importance of possessions, power, and prestige, none of these are capable of satisfying the deepest hunger of our souls. Abundant life radiates from the one who is the bread of life.

Will you trust Jesus? Will you pursue him? Will you embrace him? If you do, he will penetrate your mind, heart and soul, and kindle beautiful changes within you. Joy will take root, kindness will become second nature, hope will brighten your outlook, empathy will revise your thinking, passion for justice will guide you, and love will bless you. In worship, in contemplation of scripture, in prayer, in music, in sharing God's love with others, in celebrating the Lord's Supper, you can taste and see that the bread of life can satisfy your deepest hunger.

NOTES

1. Lauren Winner, "Bread," an essay in the journal *Image*, issue 84.
2. Debi Thomas, "Bread of Heaven," *JourneyWithJesus.Net*, July 29, 2018.
3. Michael L. Lindvall, "Living Water," March 19, 2017.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God –

Artist of Creation – We worship you with humble heart, for you are the Lord and Giver of Life! By your grace, the sun casts golden beams upon the earth; by your grace, the rain nurtures gifts of fruit and grain. By your grace, we have a planet teeming with life to call 'home,' and food that blesses our tables, and sisters and brothers with whom to enjoy these gifts. With all creation we sing your praise! Alleluia!

Since the dawn of time, you have provided for your people. With manna in the wilderness and water from the rock, you nourished our bodies. With pastures green and quiet streams, you sustained our spirits.

In the fullness of time, you sent your Son — the Bread of Life — that we might hunger and thirst no more.

Jesus Christ is:

the Good Shepherd, who tends his flock with loving care and calls us each by name;
the Light of the World, who dispels the darkness and illumines our path;
the True Vine, who joins us together and nurtures us 'til we bear fruit;
the Resurrection and the Life, who unbinds our grave clothes and beckons us from the tomb.

Trusting that Christ opens the way to eternal life, we pray for all in our world that seems shrouded in darkness:

for lands ravaged by war and neighborhoods torn by conflict;
for communities reeling from the devastating effects of flood or flame;
for homes that feel empty after the loss of one held dear;

for bodies plagued by addiction or disease;
for the people and places we name before you in silence ...

Holy One — You offer the true bread from heaven, which gives life to the world. By your grace, nourish and sustain your people as you have in ages past: with peace that comforts and joy that surprises, with love that inspires and hope that uplifts. Heal and transform your world until all creation hungers and thirsts no more.

As we gather at this table, feed us we pray ... not only with gifts of fruit and grain, but with the food that satisfies the hungry heart. Nourish and sustain us with the bread of heaven and the cup of new life, that we might rise from this meal renewed, restored, and ready to bear witness to the One who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

It is in Christ's name that we pray, and offer the words he taught us:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.