



“Is it Just Bread?”

Scripture – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, July 30, 2017

I would like to take an unofficial survey. What kind of bread do you like? Wheat, Italian, a French baguette, croissants? Does anyone like pumpernickel? How many like bagels?

How many of you have ever had naan? That is the staple of our refugee family. Maryam Muhammadi makes this flatbread for their family. It is common in Afghanistan and that part of the world.

My favorite may be banana bread – fresh out of the oven, still warm, slathered in butter!

Our grandson, Matthew, is with us this weekend and that means we had to stock up on Hawaiian rolls. If you have never tried them, don't! All it takes are a couple of bites and you are on the slippery slope that leads to gluttony! In no time at all, you will have difficulty squeezing into your pants!

Last weekend I heard an interesting story about bread. Usually when we eat bread, there will be a few crumbs left on the plate. No big deal, we wipe them into the sink or the trash and they're gone. But, it turns out that crumbs are a very big deal in outer space.

NASA discovered this in 1965 when Gus Grissom and John Young were orbiting earth. Astronaut Young pulled something out of his pocket. Grissom said, “What is it?”

Young replied, “A corned beef sandwich.”

Grissom: “Where did that come from?”

Young: “I brought it with me.” And then, “Whoa, it's breaking up. I'd better stick it back in my pocket.”

“John Young smuggled the first corned beef sandwich into space, but when he took a bite, microgravity took over spreading bread crumbs throughout the spacecraft. Crumbs might seem harmless on earth, but they are the ultimate enemy in microgravity. They could get in the eyes of astronauts or be inhaled, making the astronaut choke. They could get into electrical panels and spark a fire. Ever since then, astronauts have been eating tortillas instead of bread.”

“But in the town of Bremen, Germany, tortillas don't cut it. German astronaut Alexander Gerst is going to the international space station next year to spend several months. And that prompted a thought in a German named

Sebastian: “If this astronaut is going up there for such an extended period, shouldn’t we do something to enable him to have fresh bread?”

“So, Sebastian and his friends started a company called, I kid you not: ‘Bake in Space.’ They have partnered with the German Aero Space Center. Their goal is to make an oven that can successfully bake dough on the international space station and that’s no small trick. First, the oven needs to function on about one tenth of the power that an oven on earth does. And it’s impossible to preheat the oven because if it gets hot, and the door is opened, a giant hot air bubble could leave the oven and float into the space craft. It could just sit there in mid-air and the astronaut could burn himself if he floats through it.”

“Then, there’s the problem of the dough. At low heat, the bread will have to bake for a longer period of time. But the longer it bakes the drier it will get. And, of course, they have to avoid crumbling at all costs. Despite the technical challenges, Sebastian thinks they will be able to have the German astronaut bake the first loaf of sourdough in space.”

It is a fascinating story, but what really caught my attention was what Sebastian said at the end. He said, “It’s not just about making one German astronaut happy with fresh bread. There’s a deeper meaning to bread. Bread is pervasive. It has made its way onto our dinner tables, into our religion, even into our rap songs. Bread stands for well-being and for quality of life. We break bread with strangers as a gesture of good faith.”¹

If you are even slightly familiar with the gospels, you know that Jesus loved to teach; and one of his favorite literary devices was the parable – a way of conveying a truth by the use of a thought-provoking analogy.

In today’s text, Jesus is trying to help his followers understand the kingdom of God, or what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven. Kingdom refers not to a place, but a state of affairs. The kingdom of God is where the world is as God intends for it to be. Some refer to it as the realm of God. We see glimpses of it today, but it will not be fully present until sometime in the future. It is when compassion and justice and peace will reign and all will be right. Over the course of our lives, there are times when we edge closer to it, and other times – we are in one of those now – when we pull away from it. But, the Scriptures tell us that this is where history is ultimately headed.

Attempting to convey to his followers the nature of the divine realm, Jesus tells four pithy parables in rapid-fire succession. He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he sold all that he had and bought it.” And our focus this morning, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Bread. It is not only a staple of our diet, it is a staple of the New Testament. Time and again when we read the gospels we come across bread. After Jesus is baptized, he goes into the wilderness and after fasting for days he is famished. At the opportune moment, the tempter appears and encourages Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus replies, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

On another occasion, after Jesus has been teaching a large crowd most of a day everyone becomes hungry. Jesus multiplies loaves of bread so that all have plenty to eat.

In the final meal he shared with his disciples, Jesus took the bread, he blessed it, gave thanks to God, and then he broke it saying, “This is my body.”

When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them the most famous prayer in the world which includes, “Give us this day our daily bread.” The literal sense of those words is the physical food we need to nourish our bodies. And Jesus was usually talking to poor people who were almost always short of food. But Jesus also frequently used words to convey a double meaning. This line of the prayer means both, give us the daily bread we need to nourish and sustain our bodies, AND give us the daily bread we need to nourish and sustain our souls.

Bread in the first sense enables us to live. Bread in the second sense makes life worth living. We need bread in the first sense to survive. We need bread in the second sense to thrive. We need the first bread to satisfy the hunger of an empty stomach. We need the second bread to quench the hunger of our soul. Physical bread provides energy to make it through the day. Spiritual bread prompts the desire to make it a noble day. Wheat bread or banana bread or bagels can give you a full stomach, but only spiritual bread can give you a full life.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life.” That is, Jesus is the source of our spiritual nourishment. What does that mean? It means different things.

For instance, if you cannot shake the feeling of guilt for something you have done or left undone, the bread you need may be forgiveness. If you are going through a difficult stretch in life – the loss of a loved one, a regimen of chemotherapy, a broken relationship – the bread you may need is strength to endure. If you have a gnawing sense of emptiness that no amount of work or entertainment or food can quench, the bread you may need is a meaningful reason for getting up in the morning. If the divisiveness in our culture or the turmoil at your job or the endless stream of awful news is causing anxiety, the bread you may need is inner peace.

Perhaps you feel a restlessness in your soul and you cannot pinpoint what’s driving it. You have every material need more than met. You have loving relationships and a good job, yet you do not feel satisfied, you do not feel whole. Could you need more bread in the form of scripture? Could you need more bread in the form of prayer? More bread in the form of music? More bread in the form of feeding someone who is hungry or wiping the tears from the face of one who is suffering? Maybe you need more bread that stirs your soul and propels you off the couch to protest an injustice or march for truth.

Perhaps your calendar is crammed and your schedule is unrelenting and you need to chew on bread very slowly rather than trying to swallow it whole. Maybe you need bread in the form of being with people you love without other distractions. Perhaps you need bread in the form of watching a thunder storm, or strolling through a garden, or paying close attention to the birds in your neighborhood.

Bread in the Bible often reveals characteristics of the life of the Spirit. The manna that appeared in the wilderness saving the Hebrew people from starvation hinted at something more: the blessings of God that are fresh each day. There are basic blessings of creation that nourish our bodies and make life possible. There is the breathtaking beauty of the natural world that lifts us above dreariness. There is the automatic earth that constantly unleashes new growth of wheat and rye and oats that allow us to make our daily bread. The bread Jesus broke at the Last Supper reminds us not only of how a meal deepens bonds among friends and loved ones but remembering that meal also speaks to our hunger for the unconditional love of God.

Bread is comfort food. As it melts in our mouth and delights our taste buds, it conveys the words of the mystic, Julian of Norwich: “And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

My grandmother and Camilla’s mother must have had the same recipe for yeast dinner rolls. To this day, if we do not have them on the table at Thanksgiving, the feast is incomplete. Not because we need more carbs to go along with the stuffing, mashed potatoes, and sweet potatoes, but because they smell dreamy. They smell like – family. They smell like – love. They smell like – blessings.

Like the yeast in the flour dough, God is not always apparent in the ordinary stuff of our lives. But those who pay attention, those who have eyes to see, those who expect to find God's Spirit at work just beneath the surface, will see traces of the divine all around them.

NOTES

1. Report by Paige Pflieger for "Leap of Space," on *The Pulse* radio program on WHYI, July 20, 2017.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Eternal God, with all this talk of bread this morning, some of us are aware of growling stomachs and hunger pains. While we pause for prayer, remind us that millions in our world do not have enough bread. Every day they dream of a table brimming with different dishes, but every day they lack what they need. It is maddening that in a world with so much wealth there are so many in poverty. Show us ways to do what we can to feed people in need. Jesus said that when we feed one who is hungry, we are feeding him. Give us the will to do this holy work.

God it is not only physical hunger that stalks our planet. The violence, the injustice, the callousness, the arrogance, the deception, and the selfishness, can all be traced to barren souls. While none of us is spiritually whole, none of us as full of you as we need to be, we pray for those whose souls are especially empty.

For those prone to violence, we pray that they will begin to yearn for peace;
For those inclined to callousness, we pray for tenderness of heart;
For those disposed to arrogance, we pray for a large dose of humility;
For those whose second nature is deception, we pray that they learn to honor the truth;
For those susceptible to revenge, we pray they experience the liberation of forgiveness;
For those prone to selfishness, we pray they learn the joy of generosity.

Gracious and Loving God, give us the determination to model the values that Jesus has shown us, and help us to do it not only out of duty, but with a spirit of love. Amen.