



"Take and Eat"

Scripture – John 6:1-15; 25-35

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, July 25, 2021

"I AM" Sermon Series:

If four artists were to paint the same model, they would create four unique portraits. Their works would differ based on perspective, personal style, or simply the play of the light. In the same way, the four Gospel writers create four unique portraits of Jesus the Messiah. One way John paints his portrait is through metaphor — comparing Christ to images that would be familiar to the Gospel's original audience: bread, light, shepherd, vine. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus likens himself to various objects and concepts through statements that always begin the same way: "I am ..." During Dr. Jones' sabbatical, the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson — along with the Rev. Jill Getty and the Rev. Dr. Tracy Keenan — will explore the seven "I AM" statements of John's Gospel and the ways they contribute to a unique portrait of the Messiah who dwells among us.

"Take and Eat," which focuses on the statement, "I am the Bread of Life," is the first sermon in the series.

Last summer I spent a lot of time in the kitchen. Now, believe me when I tell you: this is *not* my natural habitat. I'd send pictures of my culinary creations to my mom and my sister and they'd reply, "Wow, I'm impressed!" (The subtext being: "I didn't know ya had it in ya."). Growing up, I had never gravitated toward the kitchen. But, last summer, I jumped on the baking bandwagon. I made chocolate chip cookies and lemon cupcakes with blackberry cream cheese frosting, banana bread and flourless chocolate cake; every few days I was whipping up something new.

I wasn't alone in this, of course. The early months of the pandemic turned many of us into baking fanatics. In those days the demand for flour was so high that suppliers couldn't keep up. I remember venturing out to the grocery store and finding the baking aisle bare. The shelves were empty; there was no flour in the store, save for one, misplaced bag hiding among the cake mix. Looking back, the pandemic baking craze makes complete sense. We were housebound, hungry people, having to fend for ourselves. Many of us were trying to find hobbies that we could do safely at home. Some of us were trying to entertain cooped-up kids in the process. It's no surprise we reached for our mixers and measuring cups.

But, I think there was something more to the baking craze. It wasn't just about filling our bellies or filling our time. In those early months of the pandemic, we were craving something more. We were craving comfort. And, so, we turned to comfort food. To flour and milk and eggs, blended and baked into something sweet — something that could satisfy our stomachs and soothe our spirits, at least for a moment. But, here's the thing, it didn't work ... not really. Yes, baking was a distraction. Yes, the baked goods were tasty. But our labor didn't satisfy our longing; the sweets didn't sustain us. Not fully, at least.

In our passage from John, we meet a crowd of people who are craving something more. And they sense that this miracle-worker — this Galilean named Jesus — can somehow satisfy their need ... though they've yet to understand why or how. The crowd is following Jesus, the text tells us, "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." They are hoping to witness another miracle; no doubt, many are vying to be the next beneficiary of his healing work. So they trek to the far side of Galilee — to the mountain where Jesus now sits with his disciples.

When Jesus sees the crowd coming, he turns to Philip and asks, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" So begins the familiar narrative of the Feeding of the 5,000. We know it well, probably because it is the only miracle to appear in all four Gospels. For whatever reason, each evangelist found it important to recount this episode in Jesus' ministry: How Jesus took five loaves and two fish and, somehow, fed a multitude. How every hungry belly was satisfied and, still, there was bread leftover — twelve baskets full. All four Gospels recount this story, but John tells it a bit differently. And it is in these divergent details that we discover a distinctive thread that will be woven throughout John's gospel.

It all begins with the setting — the time at which this miracle takes place. "Now the Passover, the Festival of the Jews, was near," John specifies. He, alone, mentions the time of year. None of the other Gospels say anything about a festival, especially this festival — the Passover, when Jews celebrate how God led their ancestors out of bondage in Egypt. Given the timing, maybe the crowds chasing after Jesus were remembering another miracle-worker — the one who stars in the Exodus story. Moses, too, had performed signs and wonders: He'd called down plagues of frogs, of hail, of locusts to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves; Moses had lifted up his staff to separate the Red Sea waters, so the people could pass through on dry land. It was Moses who directed the people to collect manna in the wilderness, assuring them it was bread from heaven; it was Moses who struck the rock at Horeb, giving the people fresh water to drink.

Of course, this is not lost on Jesus. Perhaps this is why he does not set out to perform another *healing* miracle; he does not fulfill the crowd's desire to see him *cure the sick*. Instead, Jesus turns to Philip and says, "Where are we to *buy bread* for these people *to eat*?"

Jesus perceives a different need. And he responds with a different sign. He feeds the multitude. Not, like Moses, with manna from heaven. But with five barley loaves and two fish that some little boy had packed for the journey. Jesus takes the bread and gives thanks for the gift and, then, he distributes food to the crowd. *Jesus* distributes food to the crowd. This is another detail we ought not to overlook. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is the disciples who pass out the bread and fish; it is the Twelve who do the work of feeding the multitude. But here in John, it is Jesus alone who serves. *He* goes from person to person to person — first with the bread, then with the fish — and kneels before them. "Take and eat. Taste and see." It is an offering *not* only of food, but of his very self. Bread to satisfy hungry bellies; the Bread of Heaven to satisfy hungry souls. When Jesus serves the multitude, this becomes more than a miraculous meal; it becomes communion with Christ.

But the crowd misses it. They miss it! The people are so focused on the sign that they miss the truth to which the sign is pointing — God’s presence in their midst. They do not understand the fullness of who Jesus is; they see only a prophet. They see a new Moses. “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world,” they say. At which point, Jesus withdraws to the mountain by himself. But the people pursue him. Even though the crowd has just received grace upon grace, they crave more, for they do not realize what will satisfy their hunger. This much is clear in the conversation that unfolds the next day, when they find Jesus on the other side of the lake.

Now that the crowd has been fed by his hand, they are looking for more. It appears they want Jesus to provide their daily bread — manna each morning, just like their ancestors received. But Jesus is not offering manna — not exactly, anyway. Because manna perishes. By mid-day, the manna the Israelites had left on the ground would be melted. And by the next morning, any excess they’d collected would be worm-ridden and foul. While God always provided as much as the Israelites needed, the provision only lasted a day.

Not so with the food Jesus offers — the true bread from heaven, which gives life to the world. “Sir, give us this bread always,” they say, for they do not understand that Jesus has already given it.

“I am the bread of life,” he replies. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus is the true bread from heaven — the bread that lasts; the bread that sustains, the bread that gives life to the world. To have their craving satisfied, the people need only believe. They need only accept the gift Jesus has already offered — the gift of God’s abundant love, made known here through bread and fish; the gift of abiding relationship, of communion with Christ.

For John this miracle on the mountainside is not about filling empty bellies. Not really. Jesus cares about hunger; after all he will later tell his disciples: “Feed my sheep.” But John knows that bread and fish are not enough to satisfy the hunger of the crowd. Just like we know that flour and milk and eggs, blended and baked into something sweet, are not enough to provide the comfort we crave in times of crisis. We need more. We need communion with Christ. And that’s exactly what Jesus offers. Through bread broken and shared, that’s what Jesus offers each and every person gathered on that mountain. And that’s what Jesus offers us — a relationship that sustains life. It’s an invitation that Jesus extends, day in and day out. And, while communion with Christ is certainly not limited to bread broken and shared, this gift of relationship is sometimes most clearly experienced in the ordinary stuff of life: in bread and fish, in water and wine, in the fellowship of friends. In simple things that draw us into the divine embrace.

Sara Miles discovered this truth in the most unexpected place.¹ The daughter of two disillusioned missionary kids, Sara had been raised to scorn religion. But one day — for no earthly reason — she wandered into St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church, received communion, and found herself changed. She kept coming back — craving the communion of bread and cup, craving communion with Christ. This experience transformed her life and led her toward a new vocation; a year after Sara wandered into St. Gregory’s, she started a food pantry in the sanctuary — loading up the altar each Friday with groceries before opening the doors and inviting neighbors to take and eat.

Communion was at the center of Sara’s faith. The meal that had unexpectedly transformed her life continued to sustain her life. And, yet, before long she discovered that her experience of God was not limited to this sacrament. “Even though church was where I found communion,” she writes in her memoir, “church couldn’t, finally, contain it.”

¹ Sara Miles, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

Sara recalls a day when she was caring for her dear friend, Millie. Millie was sick and weak — her body ravaged from cancer and from radiation — and she was angry. Millie was filled with rancor and resentment, and she was lashing out at those she loved most. On that particular day, Sara was weary; she couldn't bear her friend's incessant pain, her rants, her fear and bitterness. And, so, she retreated to the kitchen so Millie wouldn't see her cry. As Sara leaned on the counter, tearing toast into pieces small enough for Millie to swallow, she whispered: "Help, I can't do this alone." And, then, Sara began to pray. It was the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving that rose to her lips — the communion prayer her community offered week in and week out. "Take, eat: This is my body, which is given for you."

"I wasn't alone," Sara realized. "Something was in the kitchen with me ... like the piece of bread in my hands, warm and uncompromisingly alive." She took the toast into the bedroom, where Millie had propped herself up with a couple of pillows. "Millie," she said, "this is for you." Her friend took the sacrament, chewing and swallowing carefully. They didn't say anything more. Millie breathed, quieted. Reflecting on that moment, Sara wrote this: "It was like time out of time, each earthly detail incredibly vivid, with the eternal hovering right there in the middle of it, side by side with the suffering, and a huge peace beating slowly like the heartbeat of God."

And, again, the eternal was hovering right there on a day when Sara was frustrated because nothing at the food pantry was going according to plan. She was irritable and impatient, trying frantically to open the pantry on time, when a woman pushed her way to the front of the crowd and thrust a package at Sara. "Here," she said, as she handed Sara a piece of fish wrapped in wax paper, still warm. "Food, for you."

And, again, the eternal was hovering right there on the evening that Sara finally came out to her mother — not as a lesbian (her mom already knew that), but as a Christian. Over bread and wine and pan-seared lamb, Sara told the woman who'd raised her to scorn religion that she'd started going to church. And as their conversation spilled out, Sara felt fear evaporating — not just her own, but her mother's as well. "It wasn't official Eucharist," Sara writes. "It wasn't official Eucharist. It was real communion, with all the incomplete and aching parts still there. Made by human hands, out of meat and hope, incarnate: what the Russian mystics called 'a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, where none are left behind.'"

In all these moments, and more, it was as if Jesus was kneeling before Sara on the mountainside, offering not only bread, not only fish, but his very self — a communion always accessible, a relationship that sustains. And this gift is for us, too. Every day, every hour. Made known even in the most ordinary stuff of life ... perhaps made known *especially* in the ordinary stuff of life. Jesus kneels before us, too; he holds out bread to satisfy hungry bellies, the Bread of Heaven to satisfy hungry souls. "Take and eat," he says. "Take and eat. Taste and see."

Prayers of the People – David Robertson

Most loving and compassionate God, many among us are tired; wilted by the withering heat of recent days; sapped of strength; and drained of energy. We are wearied by the strains that life imposes on us – the pressures under which we are forced to live. We remember the days that are behind us – how fragmented and frustrated we often felt. We remember the tension we have lived with; the anxiety that nearly swallowed us up, and we know that you did not intend for us to live like that. We remember the confusion that hovered over us like a dense fog along the coastline of our mind, and we realize that no child of your kingdom should experience such bewilderment.

Yet we do not pray that everything should always be the same, for we would get tired of unending sunshine and long for a shower of rain. We do not pray that our lives may always dwell on level places, for then we would long to climb a mountain. We do not pray our lives may always be favored with the strains of pleasant music, for then we would yearn for the soothing sounds of silence.

But we do pray, O Lord, that there might be a pattern of consistency in our relations with you. Teach us how to maintain life on an even keel. With a balanced life of faith and trust in you, and kindness and love toward one another, we shall avoid being at one moment emotionally "sky-high" and then plunging at the next to the bottom of a well!

Help us to walk hand-in-hand with you, knowing that you came down from the mountaintops to walk in the valleys. May we not give way to despair when we must navigate life's valleys, knowing that the trail winds upward again.

Whether on the mountaintop or in the valley, may we always be aware that you are walking beside us. And if you are with us, what difference does it make where we are? Our life is blessed and meaningful!

All this we ask in the strong name of Christ Jesus, our savior, who taught us to pray saying:

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 forever. Amen