



“Non-Perishable Bread”

Scripture – John 6:24-35

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, August 4, 2024

How many of you are members...of the clean plate club? Growing up, I learned to eat everything on my plate. To leave even a single bite was not only a terrible waste, but on the verge of committing sin. The chief way I developed this approach to meals was simply copying my father. His plate was always stacked high and once he finished it off, he scooped up a second helping. Dad ate every bite – no, every last crumb – on his plate at every meal.

When I opened our refrigerator door, it was always bulging with food, and the same could be said of our kitchen cabinets. Did I mention the large freezer in our garage? Dad made sure that it was filled to overflowing with frozen food.

At Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims had nothing on us. Our dining room table – with two extra leaves to extend it – could not hold all the food for that feast. Platters of food were brought to the table in waves. And on the few occasions our family went out to dinner, Dad’s favorite was – you guessed it – all-you-can-eat buffets.

It was not until I was older that I understood that dad’s obsession with never being short on food stemmed from his childhood. His parents divorced when he was young, and he was sent to live with his grandparents on a farm in a small rural community in Oklahoma. This was during the Great Depression, and they were so poor, they bartered for sugar and flour.

My father served on a Destroyer Escort in the North Sea during World War II and went on to become a successful pharmaceutical sales rep, and a generous member of his Presbyterian church. But his childhood left a lasting scar.

Of course, I have no idea what it’s like to fear not having enough to eat. When I was in my twenties, I spent a week in Haiti and witnessed a multitude of people who wake up every day wondering where the next meal will come from. I’ve seen hunger when we serve guests at Emmanuel Dining Room and today Palestinians in Gaza are starving. Nevertheless, I cannot really imagine that desperate feeling.

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, the author hones in on food – in particular: bread.

Today's passage is part of a larger narrative that began on a hillside in Palestine. Jesus fed a huge crowd with only a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. After quenching their hunger, Jesus crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Our passage picks up the events of the following day when the crowd crawled into boats, shoved off from shore, and sailed in search of Jesus. Once they locate him, Jesus says, "I know you have come looking for me because I filled your stomachs with bread. You should not spend your energy on food that perishes, but instead, on food that endures for eternal life."

Puzzled by his words, people question Jesus. He responds, "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." The people jump at that and say, "Sir, give us this bread always." And Jesus says, "**I** am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

It is obvious when we read this passage that bread functions on two levels. On one level, bread represents what we consume to nourish us physically. Bread provides the energy we need to work, walk, and play. Too much bread and we acquire these lovely "energy reserves" around our waist! Especially when the bread comes in the form of chocolate.

The people who came to hear Jesus fully understood the necessity of bread for physical survival. They did not have cupboards full of food and certainly no freezer in the garage. In the first century, the overwhelming majority of people spent a significant portion of each day providing for their physical needs. It is so different with us. When we think about a meal, we think in terms of choices. What will I have for lunch today? Salad or sub sandwich? Pasta or sushi?

We think in terms of calories – we don't want people to look at us and wonder: Former offensive lineman in the NFL? The people who came out to hear Jesus also thought in terms of calories. The great majority of people in the ancient world were poor and physical nourishment was constantly at the forefront of their minds. They wondered: Will I be able to put my hands on enough food today to sustain my family for another 24 hours?

To people for whom bread was not a second thought, but a question of survival, Jesus said, "Do not work for food that *perishes*, but for food that *endures*."

I suspect the crowd's first reaction was enormous disappointment. "We are hoping for another delicious dinner, and you speak *poetically*?" However, Jesus uses the crowds yearning for the bread that nourishes physically as an opening to talk about the bread that can nourish them spiritually. Our passage underscores the fact that we are more than simply physical creatures. We are also spiritual beings.

Mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said that there is an emptiness within us that we try in vain to fill with all sorts of things. However, none of them can help because "**this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself.**" Even those well-known theologians, Pink Floyd, point to the emptiness within us in their song "High Hopes." They sing, "Encumbered forever, by desire and ambition, there's a hunger still unsatisfied."

What might be rumbling around in the basement of your being? What might be stirring in the cellar of your soul?

We experience spiritual hunger in a variety of ways. You may experience it as a yearning for love and acceptance. Parents and friends have failed you and so you find it hard to trust that God loves you. Or maybe you carry guilt over a past failure. You did something unethical or let someone down or used bad judgment and you can't stop kicking yourself for not responding with your better self. Each of us needs to know in the depth of our soul that despite the fact that we sometimes mess up badly, God loves us, wants the best for us, and craves a connection with us.

In our day, many feel empty within because they yearn for meaning and purpose. It is vital that we believe that what we do matters and that we are making a positive contribution to the life of another. Our culture attempts to deflect our attention from our search for meaning by substituting a drive for success. Society blares, "Go for wealth! Go for notoriety! Go for power!" And, if you achieve one or more of these, society will stamp the word "Successful" on your bio and that may distract you from your hunger for something more satisfying than success – meaning and purpose.

Diana Butler Bass, who will be our Westminster Distinguished Speaker in September, tells of a friend of hers "who went through a painful personal crisis." At first, it seemed to be the result of a breakup. Then it went deeper, as he realized that he did not understand the meaning or purpose of his own life. He was both anxious and depressed. 'I think,' he confessed, 'that I'm really having a spiritual crisis.'

"They had several conversations about faith and at some point, she gave him a small book of gratitude quotes. She suggested that he might take his focus off his feelings of loss and, instead, try to find something good each day. She hoped he might see how much there was to be thankful for – that despite immediate challenges, he was a gifted person with much to offer the world. Maybe looking for gratitude could help him find his way."

"A couple days later, he texted her a quote from the book that had spoken to him. It read: 'God, help me to quiet my noisy, worrisome mind in my ordinary world. Help me to relax in the familiar and to be aware of and appreciate it.'"

"Of all the possible quotes in the book for him to choose, this one surprised her. She had expected something more straightforward, perhaps comforting words about gifts and abundance. But his quote was a prayer: 'God, help me to relax in the familiar and to be aware of and appreciate it.' Her friend was not asking for a dramatic healing, for answers to be written in the sky, or for God to fix his problems. He wanted to see the world around him more fully and deeply, to develop greater awareness, and to be grateful for what was already there."¹

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.

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 for eternal life.

Your presence in worship demonstrates that you understand that we are more than physical creatures. We are also spiritual beings. 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. Diana Butler Bass, "Choosing Gratitude as a Way of Life," *Day1.org*, April 12, 2018.

Great Prayer ~ Randy Clayton

Eternal God, you made heaven and earth, people and animals, trees and rivers, the sun and the moon too. We praise you for your creation, and for your steadfast love through the ages. We praise you for delivering us from slavery, for the desert journey, and for prophets and kings who followed your call.

As we gather this day we remember with joy and thanksgiving the freedom won this week for some held hostage and for their safe return home. We give you thanks for signs of comradeship, sportsmanship, and collegiality we have seen in Paris during the Olympics. But as we give thanks, we also acknowledge heavy hearts for a world that is at war, that we humans try to solve our problems with violence, violence that only escalates into more violence. We pray for peace, O God, how we pray for peace.

With bread on our tables, we pray for those whose tables are empty, that they may one day soon have enough to eat. With the wine of your love in our hearts, we pray for those who anxiously await the results of medical tests or who are preparing for surgical procedures, and for those whose hearts are torn apart with grief. Heal those who hurt.

Praying for peace and life for all, we remember with thanksgiving the love shown to us in Jesus Christ, who lived, and died and lives again. And we give thanks for the bread we break and the cup we bless. Let your Spirit move in and through and among us as we eat and drink this day. And let these signs and symbols deepen our faith and our fellowship that we might go forth from here ever more ready to work for the world you call into being, ever more ready to be your people in words and in deeds.

We ask this remembering the prayer which Jesus taught 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 and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."**