

Bread of Life – Soul Food

John 6:27-35

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27 "Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last." 28 To that they said, "Well, what do we do then to get in on God's works?" 29 Jesus said, "Throw your lot in with the One that God has sent. That kind of a commitment gets you in on God's works."

30 They waffled: "Why don't you give us a clue about who you are, just a hint of what's going on? When we see what's up, we'll commit ourselves. Show us what you can do. 31 Moses fed our ancestors with bread in the desert. It says so in the Scriptures: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Jesus responded, "The real significance of that Scripture is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven but that my Father is right now offering you bread from heaven, the real bread. 33 The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving life to the world." 34 They jumped at that: "Master, give us this bread, now and forever!" 35 Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever."

John 6:27-35 The Message

Have you taken communion in different settings? Do you remember the first time? How has the meaning changed over the years? Coming to the table, breaking bread, communion, sacrament, Eucharist. I remember being at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, Scotland. This is considered the “mother ship” for Presbyterians. John Knox preached there during the Reformation. When we worshiped there in 2012 during my sabbatical, we were invited to come forward and form a circle near the communion table. The loaf of bread was passed and we tore off a piece and ate. Then a large silver chalice came around and we were invited to drink wine from the common cup. That was a surprise. I remember leading a youth group mission trip to Washington DC. I wanted the senior highs to think about the common foods of bread and wine in Jesus time. Every time the disciples ate together, they were to remember Jesus. So what was the most common food to those high school students? We celebrated communion or an agape feast with pizza and Pepsi!

When we break the bread and pour the cup, it is a profound mystery. I knew at a young age that it was more than a Passover meal with Jesus. Somehow we do this in the presence of Christ who is alive. We don't call it “the Last Supper,” which was a onetime event. The Table is for the communion, and we “celebrate it.”

That makes it a mystery. One thing we know about the human psyche: **we don't know what to do with mystery.**

Much of the last five hundred years, we have lived through a continuing effort to remove all mystery from human life. We analyze everything scientifically. We work to remove all ambiguity. We develop technology that we can put in our cell phones, to know precisely where we are located and how long it will take to drive to Mendocino or Shasta, or wherever else we want to go. In some ways it has been a vain attempt to control life, and overlook the truth that life is largely uncontrollable.

If I listen closely to people within the church or those with no faith affiliation, whether spiritual-but-not-religious or religious-but-not-very-spiritual, **all of them have a deep hunger and thirst for holy mystery**. Either they want a living experience of God in their lives, or they want God who is far more alive and live-giving than the lesser gods they have grown tired of hearing about from a distance.

This awkwardness about mystery is one of the issues dangling in our Gospel text. Jesus is arguing with some of the religious leaders of his time. They don't like it that he speaks in metaphors. He says, "I am the bread of life," and they say, "What's he talking about?" He says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," and they say, "Is he crazy? We know his mom and dad, Mary and Joseph.

When has Jesus said anything literal in the Gospel of John? Just about every time he opens his mouth, **a metaphor floats out**. The literally-minded will miss the truth that he wraps in figures of speech.

He says, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." And Nick says, "Do we have to have to crawl back into our mother's wombs?" Of course, it is totally lost on Nicodemus that Jesus is suggesting a feminine attribute of God. Think about this: God is the One who gives birth again... and again and again.

Or to that woman in Samaria, who comes by herself to draw water from the well, Jesus says, "If you knew who I am, you would ask and he would give you living water." She looks at him, daring to talk to a female at high noon in the village square, and says, "Where is your bucket?" She doesn't perceive him yet, as the fountain of God's grace.

Over and over, he speaks of God's grace and truth in metaphors that dance and sparkle. "I am the light of the world." "I am the Good Shepherd." "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

To understand Jesus as John reveals him, one must have a vibrant understanding of language.

What is he saying? The Gospel of John was probably written down around 90 AD, some 60 years after the resurrection. **What John reports in the words of Jesus is the living experience of the early Christians**. As they gather at the Table, they receive the grace and truth of the Lord. The bread and cup are a way of taking the mystery of Christ into our lives, our souls, and

our bodies. In eating, Jesus becomes real to them. It has always been that way for those who welcome Christ into their lives.

All the elaborate theories will come centuries later, from theologians who apparently had a lot of time on their hands. Conversely, the critics outside the church didn't comprehend the metaphors that are given to the faithful. There are accounts from Roman officials accusing the early Christians of being cannibals, among other things. And of course, they couldn't understand.

The heart of the matter is that Christ is our life. alive, for God is alive. His invitation to "eat and drink" is the invitation to take part in his life. It's what he calls "the life of eternity." (zoe aionios)

A lot of times we translate this phrase as "eternal life." I believe that is a flat translation. That, for many people, is a life that goes on and on forever. When a lot of folks hear about "eternal life," they think only about the next life, about heaven.

But Jesus is speaking of something far greater. He is speaking about this life, the only life we get. When he points to "**the life of eternity,**" it's a way of referring to "**the life that God lives**" or "the life of the Risen Christ." It's a way of being and doing, serving and loving, forgiving and rejoicing, here and now. Certainly it continues into the future for as long as God's eternity shall last. But it starts here and now, by taking the mystery of Christ into our mouths and hearts and hands. The mystery is like a small seed that can grow until it fills us.

Bread and cup are the means by which we return regularly for this mystery.

We keep returning to the Table, to eat bread broken, receive cup of love poured out, to receive power to keep going on. It matters not if we have perfectly cubed Wonder Bread or flat, dry matzah or little pre-packaged cup and bread. What matters is that we keep returning to Christ, our hearts broken open, ready to receive the life of eternity that is a holy gift.

Sara Miles in her book, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, offers these words:

Communion. I chewed and swallowed it. It was at the absolute center of my faith: wheat and water and yeast and heat; grape and sun and time; bread and wine, transformed into life. I ate it up. I kept coming back for more. And yet, even though church was where I found communion, church couldn't, finally, contain it." As we come to the table today, may we be open again to this mystery of being fed and going out to feed others.

Amen.

This sermon was inspired by Rev. William G. Carter, "Wonder Bread and the Life of Eternity" 8/9/15
<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2015/08/wonder-bread-and-life-of-eternity.html>