

"The Bread of Life" – August 12, 2018 – John 6:35, 41-51

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Our passage this morning begins with Jesus saying, "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Now not surprisingly, the people listening to him were astounded by this claim. They began to grumble among themselves. "We know this guy. We know where he comes from, who his father Joseph is. We also know his mother. How can he claim to be the bread that comes down from heaven? What is he talking about?"

Thinking he was simply the son of common carpenter, they discounted his words as foolishness, unable to comprehend the truth of what he was saying. So they muttered among themselves. For those hearing John's gospel, this language would have reminded them how their ancestors complained during the time of the Exodus. Moses had led the people out of Egypt and out of slavery. But over and over the people complained to Moses. They griped because they had nothing to eat, so God sent them the manna, the bread from heaven. Every day God provided the manna for their survival. They griped because they had no water, so God provided water for them. On a later occasion they griped about the manna itself, saying they were tired of eating the same thing day after day. As if God owed them a buffet! This theme of complaining returns in John's Gospel.

Parallel to the Exodus story, these folks in John's gospel were rejecting what God had provided for them – the provision found in Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't answer their questions directly, but instead told them they were resisting the draw of God to the offer of life found in him.

So what does that mean, what is this offer of God, what are they missing out on? What does it mean that Jesus is the Bread of Life? That's a rather strange metaphor. But again, reminds us of a passage from Deuteronomy "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (8:2-3) Humans do not live by bread alone. We live by every word that comes from God. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh, who came down from heaven. And it is through him that we find life, true spiritual life.

Within in each of us is a spiritual longing, an emptiness, that can only be satisfied by God. As the 17th century mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal once wrote: "There is in each of us a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill." We have all felt this longing at some point or another during our lives. The seeking, the longing for something more, for some greater purpose. Poets, songwriters, and authors have written millions of words trying to describe it. Inside each one of us is a need to find meaning in life. We have deep questions that seemingly have no answers.

Some people try to fill this need for God through relationships, hoping and expecting another person to satisfy this longing. Eventually the object of affection is found to be lacking, and so other objects are pursued, each one failing in turn. Other people focus on their careers, putting occupational success as the highest goal to reach. Yet in the face of layoff or retirement, suddenly one's entire existence turns into a house of cards. Still others idolize their own families, living vicariously through the successes and failures of their spouses and children. Yet when the spouse is gone and the kids move away, an empty nest often leads to depression and feelings of meaninglessness.

Materialism is another dead end road. The acquiring of things has given many people the illusion that money can buy happiness. But soon we realize the fancy cars, the summer homes, the electronic gadgets are just not enough, but we continue to spend our money in that elusive search for wholeness. Some people resort to living the high life, literally. Using drugs or alcohol to satisfy that inner craving. But when the next morning rolls around, that lifestyle results in nothing but hangovers and emptiness. Of course all these examples are useless substitutes for the real thing. Only God can fill that God-shaped vacuum.

Jesus is the Bread of Life. Just as we need food on a daily basis to sustain our bodies and provide fuel in order for our body to function, so too, we need spiritual food through Christ so that we might have eternal life. Jesus says in verse 47 that those who believe in him have eternal life. In the Gospel of John the theme of believing is an important one. And for John, believing goes beyond just affirming the truth of something. Believing takes on an active role.

Look at it this way, if we really seek to find fulfillment for that God-shaped vacuum within us, it requires more than some glib statement of our faith in Jesus. Lots of people say that they believe in Jesus, but the way they live their lives tells a different story. Here's an example, author Jeanne Zornes writes, "As a new Christian, I presumed Jesus' main job was taking care of me. He led to me a job, roommates to share apartment costs, and a car that ran. But after a while my tastes got fussier. Like the Israelites waking up to manna every morning, I was tired of the same-old, same-old. I wanted a home with more privacy, a more interesting yet less stressful job, and a shinier new car. My list continued to grow. I wanted Jesus to perk me up when I was down, remove my difficulties, and make living a whole lot easier." Does any of that sound familiar to you? It does to me. So often we pay lip service to our faith, and expect God to sort of bail us out when we fall upon hard times. And we still wonder why we feel like we're missing something. We feel that way because we are missing something!!

Verse 51 reads "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Eating is an active thing. We actually have to go, acquire the food we want to eat, prepare it, put it in our mouths, chew it up and swallow it. There is nothing passive about eating.

Jesus, as the Bread of Life, is telling us, to experience the life that he has to offer, we have to actually partake of it. Thus to believe in him, we have to seek him out, consume him and digest him.

There certainly is a sacramental aspect to this passage of Scripture, it reminds us of the Lord's Supper, and that is played out in greater detail in verses 52 through 59. But the point we need to see here this morning is that our response to Jesus requires some action on our part.

Consider this – as we grow older and more attuned to health concerns, we realize that while there is a wide variety of foods we could consume, we know that we need to be mindful of what we eat. Some of us have to watch our sugar intake, others may have restrictions against eating too much salt or having to avoid foods with gluten. We may also take into consideration how many chemicals are in processed foods, or perhaps we stick to eating organics. As much as we may enjoy the occasional junk food binge, we know we can't live on chips and cookies. Too much unhealthy food is detrimental to our health, and so we try to consume a diet filled with healthy choices.

In the same way, we need to consider how we are feeding our spiritual selves. What are we feeding our minds with? The things we read, the shows we watch on TV, the movies we view on Netflix, the Internet sites we visit, the activities in which we engage, the conversations we have, the thoughts upon which our minds dwell. If we were to do a full assessment of spiritual diets, there are probably some things that each of us should do without. Because if we fill our spiritual mouths with a bunch of junk, we are not filling them with the Bread of Life.

Many of us get caught up into the trap of believing that Sunday morning is for God, the rest of the week is ours to do as we please. Here's the problem. Do we only eat once a week? Of course not. We need food pretty regularly to keep our body healthy and fully functioning. So too we need spiritual nourishment on a regular basis to keep our spiritual selves healthy and fully functioning. The nourishment of our spiritual self should become a regular part of our daily activities. Trying to stuff it all in by gorging ourselves one day doesn't seem to work very well. We'll still wake up hungry the next day.

We can find this nourishment when we read and study the Bible and engage in prayer. When we can quiet our minds from worldly noise and clutter, we are more open to hearing God's words to us. Getting away from our routines and celebrating the wonder of God's creation through nature. Some people enjoy the disciplines of meditation and fasting. Participation in the life and community of the church through worship and mission is also spiritually nourishing. There are many, many ways to partake of spiritual nourishment, it doesn't have to be a boring chore. But we do need to be intentional about it.

Bible Commentator Ravi Zacharias has this to say about this passage in the Gospel of John, "The words of Jesus were intended to lift the listeners from their barren, food-dominated existence to the recognition and acknowledgment of the supreme hunger of life that can only be filled with a different bread. Food and power blind the mind to the need for nourishment and strength of soul. Unfortunately, many fail to pause here long enough to really hear what Jesus is teaching and understand the life-transforming power contained in this truth." And life-transforming it can be. If we

dine on the words and teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures, we will come to know him more intimately and find that the God-shaped vacuum within us has been filled by the only one can fill it. Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.