

To give some context to this morning's message, it seems helpful to look back to the beginning of the sixth chapter of John, and as we follow through the verses we will find the entire chapter deals with "bread" in some way. Beginning with verse one, we find the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand people with five small barley loaves and two fish. We then find Jesus using that miracle to teach. Beginning with verse twenty-six to the end of the chapter, we find Jesus attempting to get those following him in increasing numbers to understand who he really was- that the bread he had to offer was more than the quantity of daily food provided so miraculously from the meager lunch of a young boy. This "living bread" that comes from heaven gives us a glimpse of the type of spiritual nourishment that Jesus provides to anyone who will dare eat his flesh and drink his blood. It is not the type of bread that will fill the stomach- but the type that can fill the soul through eternity.

Before we attempt to grasp what the words of Jesus mean, think just a moment about bread. Many of you may remember the times before all the Covid-19 chaos when Chuck would often make bread for coffee hour. It is likely that each of us can bring up memories of grandmothers or mothers making bread and the smell, even today, will remind us of the awesomeness of a fresh, warm slice.

A number of years back when our youngest son, Jon, was probably about three years old, he went with us on a visit to George and Mae Novak. I can still picture Mae, asking Jon if he like peanut butter sandwiches and in response to his enthusiastic, affirmative nod, she cut him a slice of freshly baked bread and spread it liberally with peanut butter. Until the day she died, Mae Novak was Jon's "peanut butter grandma" and she always remembered his birthday with a jar of peanut butter. The connections she made with this young child over a piece of bread still linger even though Jon is much older and Mae went to be with God many years ago.

Bread comes in a variety of forms- pita or pocket bread from the Mediterranean heritage; crisp long baguettes from the French bakeries; crusty whole wheat loaves; buns on which to put a hamburger or hot dog; dark rye bread; bagels; English muffins; even zucchini bread- we could go on and on. -

Bread has often been called the "staff of life." For the nourishment of our bodies, it is without measure. Its value is far beyond simply being a way to more neatly eat peanut butter or to contain a hamburger. Along with water, bread holds the capacity to sustain life for a very long time.

Jesus, in the Gospel reading from John this morning, uses the example of bread to help those around him more clearly grasp the concept of who he really was. He calls himself bread..."the bread that came down from heaven," the bread that will help people to "live forever." -1-

Once again, Jesus is using a very common item- in this case bread- to teach a lesson. Bread of some sort was then and continues to be familiar to everyone and is known to be very nourishing.

But Jesus' words, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" are met NOT with gratitude and understanding, but with angry questions. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How barbaric and ridiculous! But Jesus goes on with words that anger them further when he tells them that, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Wow!! As if his first statement wasn't bad enough! It is obvious from their response that they were not able to get beyond taking Jesus' words literally. They seem to speak for many when they say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" And in actions all too humanly familiar, some of them give up following Jesus because they simply cannot open their ears and minds to hear and understand what Jesus is saying.

I believe that most of us who claim the title Christian do not question that Jesus is the "Bread of Life." That concept has been an important part of our spiritual development and is accepted through faith. Rather than simply accept it, I believe it is wise to stop and think about our understanding of that phrase and this morning's Scripture encourages us to do just that.

"Bread of Life." The smell of freshly baked bread that quickly brings most of us back to memories of home, certainly holds the potential of being "life giving." While the smell alone may warm our hearts, it is likely a rare day that we do not eat bread of some sort. Bread is basic to our food diets- bread sustains us daily. It is possible- maybe even likely- that on most days, bread of some sort is found in every meal we eat. I don't know about all of you, but when I am not feeling well, often the only food that sounds at all good is a piece of toasted bread- and for me, with just a sprinkle of cinnamon and sugar. How could we survive without bread?

Hold that thought!! Then take that idea and question into Jesus' words before us this morning. Certainly not literally- that only closes our minds and hearts- and we are then at a point of those around Jesus- "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

But take the idea of the importance of bread in our lives, how it nourishes us from a very early age and compare what it means that Jesus is the "Bread of Life." Through this "Bread of Life"- Jesus- we have the opportunity for nourishing our spiritual lives. In fact, the nourishment of our spiritual lives has everlasting and eternal value, going far beyond that of our human lives.

We live in these times beyond the resurrection. We have the advantage of Scripture and the message of Jesus Christ easily before us. We know of the love of God that sent Christ to the cross for each of us. But it seems that the statement from those around Jesus, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" still rings true for some. Before we quickly shake our heads at their unbelief, it may be important to ask ourselves if we are really all that different. Even with our post-resurrection knowledge, just how seriously do we take the belief that Jesus is our "Bread of Life?" Do our lives reflect a fullness and health that comes from being nourished by the "Bread of Life" just as our human, daily lives are healthy because of bread?

The "Bread of Life" offered by God through Christ is God's greatest gift to us. This "Bread of Life" provides food enough to feed all of us- not just once, but forever. It is received through faith- faith that enables one to receive simple things like bread and wine and so be reminded of the mystery of Christ's own flesh being the very presence of the risen, living Christ.

Jesus reminded those around him and reminds us that the bread for which we labor is bread that perishes. It is bread that must be replenished each day. It seems we can find an additional analogy here in that just as we need bread to nourish our bodies each day, so also we need to nourish our souls with the "Bread of Life" each and every day. Just how seriously is that concept taken? Can we simply take in Jesus Christ one time and then believe that is sufficient for all eternity? Can we one time draw from the "Bread of Life" and then remain confident that we need do nothing else? It seems the answer to those questions is quite obvious whether we wish to admit it or not. Certainly, our spiritual lives must be nourished by Jesus Christ daily just as our physical lives need the daily nourishment of bread or food.

What is required if you are to get the nutrients of food that you eat? You take it inside yourself. Unless you do that, you eventually will die. To receive the life that Jesus offers, abundant and eternal, we also have to "eat" him, take him into our hearts, souls and minds. Just as food is broken down by the body and gives us life, so Christ's love, Christ's grace is consumed by us and breaks down- impacts our lives- to drive out sin and give us life and wholeness. Ordinary food will not give us life that lasts forever. But this food, the "Bread of Life" will. This requires faith- that believing in the Son of God, accepting that his words are true and that in him God's presence and love comes into our lives.

This is at the heart of the Christian faith. This happens through faith, through believing in Christ, learning, study and trusting his teaching, seeking to serve him, through worship, prayer, Holy Communion, gathering with fellow Christians for service and fellowship. But at the most basic level, all of this is a gift. We need in the core of our beings to be in relationship with God. We hunger for this, thirst for it as much as we do for food and water. How many in our world search everywhere humanly possible, try all human possibilities, and yet continue to hunger and thirst? The Good News is that this hunger and thirst can be satisfied. Only in Jesus, God gives us God's own self.

The twelve disciples in our Gospel reading for this morning are beginning to see this. Jesus asks them point blank if they are going to leave also, for others had left after hearing what it was going to take to follow him. Peter answers for them all- that there is no one else to whom they can go. There's no bakery that provides the bread Jesus is talking about. It is only offered in and through him. Maybe they did not fully understand what this meant or how it worked out. But they had enough trust and faith in Jesus to stick with him until their knowledge and experience confirmed their faith.

In this whole chapter of John 6, Jesus has been trying to reveal that he is the source of life, real life that lasts forever, for in him God is present. Just as we must consume food or bread to live so we need to consume him, take him into our hearts and lives, if we are to truly live. Through these verses, we hear a strong echo of Holy Communion. We feel a strong emphasis of the importance of the Lord's Supper as a way of refreshing our spiritual lives- a time when we are reminded of Jesus body being broken and Jesus blood being shed for the remission of all our sins. It is a time to remember God's greatest gift to us and a time to rededicate ourselves to living lives of gratitude.

One of the commentators I read during preparation for this service called the church of Jesus Christ "a bakery"- a place where we can come to be filled with the "Bread of Life." While I cannot argue with the possible analogy, it seems that we as a congregation might regularly need to take time to consider just how full the shelves in our "bakery" are. Is this body of Jesus Christ so overflowing with the "Bread of Life" that there is abundance for all who might enter our doors?

My prayer is that each time you eat some kind of bread- no matter what form it comes in, that you will be reminded of the true bread- the "Bread of Life"- Jesus Christ available for each of us and thank God for the great gift of life available through earthly bread and the "Bread of Life." Along with that gratitude may you also seek ways to nourish your soul through opportunities of worship, study, prayer and service. Praise God for the unbelievable gift of the true "Bread of Life." Amen

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