

BREAD OF LIFE

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' ²⁶Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' ²⁸Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' ²⁹Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' ³⁰So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?' ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." ³²Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' ³⁴They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' ³⁵Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:24-35, NRSV)

My family and I flew to New York from Tennessee on Thursday of all days. Luckily the Memphis airport had short lines at the security booth, unlike New York and Chicago. I always put on a few pounds when I visit my family because they love to

cook and I love to eat. Colleen always jokes that we have a pork-fest when my family cooks and this visit was no exception—bacon, sausage, pork chops, pork steaks, and of course, pulled pork bar-b-que. Since no meal is complete without bread, we broke all the rules in the Atkins Diet plan eating every imaginable bread—whole wheat, rye, 12 grain, Italian bread, French bread, French toast, pizza dough, bagels, rolls, home-made biscuits and corn bread, and hamburger buns for our bar-b-que sandwiches (with the cole slaw stuffed *inside* the sandwich).

The vast array of breads which we ate reminds me of a Kudzu cartoon where the preacher opens his Bible and begins reading the Lord's Prayer as follows: "'Give us this day our daily...low-fat, low-cholesterol, salt-free bread...' The last frame has him [muttering], 'I hate these modern translations'" (*Homiletics*, vol. 9 no. 3, p. 30).

The problem with all the fattening breads my family and I ate, as well as the low-fat, low-cholesterol variety described in the cartoon, is that they only satisfy one's appetite for a short time. Not too many hours after eating the best bread money can buy, we will be hungry again. While earthly food will keep us going day to day, only one bread will ultimately feed our souls both now and for all eternity—the Bread of Life which comes from God.

This is the situation described in today's scripture lesson from John. Earlier in chapter 6, Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. After seeing the miracle, the people want to make Jesus their earthly king. But Jesus wants no part of this, escaping to a mountain in order to be alone. A bit later in the evening, Jesus' disciples pile in a boat to cross the Sea of Tiberius. In the midst of some rough seas, the disciples get frightened, so Jesus walks out on the water to meet them and they all make it safely to the other side. The next morning, the remnants of the crowd can't figure out where Jesus has gone. They cross the sea in their own boats and find Jesus in

another town.

Upon finding Jesus, their question seems logical enough—how did he cross the sea without a boat. But Jesus ignores their question and instead questions their motives for finding him. He says straight out that they didn't come to him because they saw the miracles, but because they wanted a free lunch. They were following a trail of bread crumbs, rather than following the footsteps of the Messiah (*Ibid.* p. 32). To remedy this, Jesus offers them a piece of advice: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'...Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent'" (6:27-30, NRSV). The people had confused works, meaning the legalistic religious laws of the day, with the true work of faith.

At this point, people are starting to catch on that this man seems to be talking about himself, that he is the one that God has sent. Skeptical, they insist on proof. They say, "Show us a sign and we'll believe you." I guess the crowd must have already forgotten about the loaves and fishes from the day before. Some in the crowd recall an old rabbinic tradition that, as in the days of Moses, when the Messiah comes, manna will once again rain from heaven. So they clamor for this heavenly bread to satisfy their appetites and to prove Jesus' claims. In response, Jesus points to the origin of the manna—not Moses, but God. Jesus speaks loud enough for all of them to hear and says, "My Father is the one who gives you the true bread from heaven. And the bread that God gives is the one who came down from heaven to give life to the world.' The people said, 'Lord, give us this bread and don't ever stop'" (6:32b-34, CEV). Jesus knew that the people still did not understand, so he said it as plainly as he could, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35, NRSV). In a sense, Jesus did indeed offer them manna, though not the kind

they were seeking. The manna he offered was himself.

If we eat of the Bread of Life, in one sense we will never be hungry. In another sense we'll still hunger every day. Daily we need food for sustenance and strength. But, we will never find real satisfaction if we only focus on the bread which perishes and not on God's eternal bread.

Have you ever been hungry for something but not been quite sure what you were hungry for? Occasionally I get the midnight munchies. I stand with the refrigerator door open, searching the shelves for just the right nibble to satiate my craving. Usually I'm after something sweet, and finding the leftover broccoli just won't fit the bill. My search moves on to the pantry and I look behind the cans of tuna; I remove the boxes of cereal; I'm on to the next shelf knocking over those thin boxes of macaroni and cheese; I get on my knees and reach back into the deepest recesses of the bottom shelf, where I cannot even see, hoping to put my finger on the right food to satisfy my hunger. If I'm lucky, I'll pull out a forgotten peppermint stick from Christmas or an unopened package of graham crackers. More times than not, my search will be unsuccessful, and the best I can find seems hardly worth the effort.

When Jesus said that those who come to him will never be hungry, perhaps he had something like this in mind. Spiritually we feel hungry and search the world's kitchen for something that will ultimately satisfy us. Finding only leftover selfishness and moldy materialism, rotting futility and a dried up fountain of youth, we must look elsewhere. We must look to the Bread of Life to find meaning and purpose. We will never be spiritually hungry again because we have found the source of satisfaction. Certainly our weary spirits will yearn at times for refreshment, our needy souls will long for God, but we know where to turn in these moments. We aren't ravenously searching for the cure to our hunger—we know the source, Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.

The truth of the matter is that our lives must feed on the

Bread of Life again and again. Daily we need strength, grace, forgiveness, hope, inspiration, and a willingness to reach out beyond our own problems to help others.

What is the key to feeding on the Bread of Life?

According to Jesus, God wants us to have faith and believe in the One whom God has sent. Jesus is simply saying, believe in me. Arthur Gossip, a former pastor and professor in Scotland, put it this way: "...to believe in Christ and the things for which he stands, the way of life he teaches us, the God whom he reveals to us, the grace and help he came to offer us, the victory which he makes possible for the least likely of us, is to have the doors flung open, and infinite possibilities keep crowding in. But it all starts with believing in him whom God has sent. Given that, the rest follows" (*The Interpreters Bible: Luke & John*, p. 564).

In Christ's life we see high ideals and teachings that we do our best to emulate: loving the unlovely, visiting the sick, forgiving our debtors. The problem is that on our own we cannot make much progress. We need more than mere teachings. We need strength and help. Indeed we seem to be missing some vital ingredient.

Attempting to follow Christ on our own is like making bread without the yeast. Yeast gives life to the bread. As commentators Rennie and Sweet say: "Except for a few special unleavened varieties, what really makes bread for most of us is yeast. A tiny one-celled organism that grows and metabolizes its own food with great speed, yeast organisms 'work' in the dough, slightly fermenting and releasing gases so that the bread begins to rise....Jesus, the Bread of Life, is energized in each one of us by divine yeast—by the Spirit of the living God, who sent Christ to be among us, to be for us, to be in us. To benefit fully from this Bread of Life, we must keep our lives, our spirits, 'yeasty'—vital and ever growing" (*Homiletics*, Vol. 9 No. 3, p. 31). For one person it means reading scripture and for another writing a letter to a shut-in, for one creating art and another contemplating it, for one

praying and another singing, for one observing God's handiwork in nature and another teaching our children in Sunday School, for one writing a letter to Congress on behalf of Bread for the World and another handing out bread at a local soup kitchen.

There is significance in the fact that Jesus refers to himself as bread. We have such vast food selections in our country that bread is almost viewed as an extra. This is not the case historically and not the case in many countries today, where bread is a staple, an essential element in one's diet (*Emphasis* vol. 29 no. 2, p. 33). Jesus, the Bread of Life, is not a take it or leave it extra. The connection he offers us to God is vital and essential to life itself.

Dr. Gossip reminds us that there is in Christ "...that which feeds, which sustains, which restores spent vigor and exhausted energies, a strength we can appropriate and make our strength, doing and being what apart from him we could not do and be....whosoever wills can have it for the asking. The one and only requirement Christ stipulates is that we have some appetite for the things he offers. Bring him that, and eagerly he will do the rest" (*The Interpreters Bible: Luke & John*, p. 567).

If we don't seek the Bread of Life, we will miss out on our lives being all that God intends them to be. Lutheran minister, Michael Sherer, reminds us, "To work for food that perishes is to settle for the merely good instead of the truly inspired. God has greater plans for us than we may have for ourselves" (*Emphasis*, vol. 27 no. 2, p. 31). Indeed, "There are far bigger and more satisfying things within our reach than we have realized" (*The Interpreter's Bible: Luke & John*, p. 563). To live life to the fullest, to keep hope in the darkest hour, to face an uncertain future, to find true joy, peace, and love, we need the Bread of Life. We never know how our lives can be transformed until we open ourselves to God's Spirit and seek Christ day by day.

God feeds our souls whether our lives are feast or famine.

In this sense it is indeed wonder bread—we are fed from life's beginning to end. Think of the variety of events taking place in our sanctuary. Week by week people enter this place on Sunday morning to worship God, seeking the Bread of Life. Throughout the year we have Holy Communion where we remember, in the breaking of bread, that Christ died for us. Babies are baptized here reminding us that God is with us from life's beginning. Couples stand in front of the altar in the presence of God to marry. Others enter our sanctuary for the funeral of a loved one and God offers comfort and strength for their heavy hearts. At life's best and brightest moments, as well as life's most sad and sorrowful moments, the Bread of Life is ours for strength, sustenance, and celebration.

This wonder bread, this wonderful bread, this Bread of Life is available night and day. Wherever we are and in whatever state we find ourselves, Christ offers us strength for abundant life on earth and everlasting life in heaven. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the many ways you nourish our souls and sustain us day by day—through the companionship of friends and family, through the inspiration of music and art, through the stimulation of great drama and literature, through the beauty of the seashore and the sunset.

Nourish us as well with your Son, Jesus Christ, that we might find in him the love, grace, courage, and strength we need every day of our lives.

Through Jesus Christ the Bread of Life we pray. AMEN.