

John 6:35, 41-51

MORE THAN BREAD

A seminarian, who was doing his diaconal ministry in a hospital in the Bronx, told of visiting an elderly Italian gentleman on a Saturday evening to inquire if he would like to receive Holy Communion on the Lord's Day. He lay in his hospital bed, his hand held lovingly by his wife, seated in a chair next to the bed. "Would you like to receive Holy Communion tomorrow, sir?" the seminarian asked. The old man looked up at his wife somewhat quizzically and said, "Eh, Mama?" Nodding knowingly, she said, "It'sa okay. It'sa only God." (Robert U. Ferguson, Jr., *Lectionary Homiletics*, Aug.-Sept. 03, p. 14)

I chose that story as a lead-in to the Gospel passage wherein Jesus made the bold claim, "I am the bread of life," because, by doing so, Jesus was indeed claiming to be God. He and the Father are one. To know Jesus is to know God. To feast on Jesus, who is the bread of life, is to know that everything's okay because "It'sa only God."

The sixth chapter of John's Gospel begins with Jesus feeding the five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish. The crowd followed after Jesus and clamored for more of the same. They wanted more bread along with more miraculous feats to entertain and satisfy them a while longer. But Jesus desired to give them so much more by giving them the gift of himself.

It is for that reason Jesus 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." As we have noted before, Jesus' "I am..." claims found throughout John's Gospel are echoes of Yahweh's encounter with Moses by the burning bush, wherein the Lord God told Moses the Divine name: "*I AM WHO I AM.*" When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," at the same time, he was claiming to be one with Yahweh.

Furthermore, bread was a metaphor for wisdom or the word of God. In his Prologue, John has already introduced us to the Word, who was with God, and the Word was God. In time, the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (and wisdom). Jesus is God come to earth in human flesh!

And, when Jesus referred to himself as "the bread of life," he was setting himself apart from everything else that was temporary in life. As good and as life-giving the manna in the wilderness was for their ancestors, Jesus reminded his audience that the manna was only good for one day at a time and then it spoiled or got moldy and was no longer useful. Likewise, no matter how delicious the bread is that we bring home from the store or the bakery, in a few hours we will feel hunger pains once again; and, in time, if we don't consume the bread in timely fashion, it too will go bad.

By contrast, Jesus is the true bread of life. Unlike physical bread or material items that satisfy our transitory needs or our wants for the time being, Jesus offers us the nourishment of true and ultimate life, now and forever. Jesus' bread – the very giving of himself to each one of us – gives us life, growth, maturity, fulfillment, satisfaction, and relationship. Jesus invites one and all to feast on himself and, in doing so, we will not go away empty; instead, we will be filled to overflowing.

The Jews (which in John's Gospel really means the religious leaders) scoffed at Jesus' claims to be God and to be able to give the people life-fulfilling bread. After all,

they knew Jesus was Joseph's son; they knew his parents. The religious authorities, like so many others, were willing to settle for less. They were unable to see that Jesus was offering them "more than just bread."

For, in fact, Jesus was offering them the real substance of life itself and that was a dynamic, life-changing relationship with himself, with God. Jesus calls us and draws us to himself; he doesn't want us to follow a religion, bow to tradition or just obey a set of rules or laws. No, Christ wants a personal, up-close, living, breathing, and vital relationship with each one of us. Jesus was offering his own people (and us as well!) a lifetime relationship (and beyond this life) with the Lord God. If we really want to taste life in all of its richness and fullness, if we want a life that meets our deepest needs, then Jesus offers us a holy relationship with God built on trust, intimacy, obedience, and love. Jesus yearns for us to have life that is abundant and eternal, life that is lived in full communion with God, and the way to that life with the Father is through Jesus. God wants to give us so much more than bread, but our temptation is to settle for less and simply go through the motions of mere existence doing what we can for ourselves in order to just get by.

I recently came across this quote, which really spoke to me. Evelyn Underhill, the famous English writer, believed that "we spend most of our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do." And we miss out on the one verb with any real significance – to Be."

In this sixth chapter of John's gospel, the people ask Jesus, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" And, Jesus answered them by saying, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." In other words, Jesus is saying, "Believe in me, the bread of life. Simply "BE" in relationship with me, and you will have all that you could ever want or desire. That's all you need to do." Jesus concludes our passage for today by saying and promising: "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."

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, a young mother and her two children found themselves among France's growing population of the homeless poor. They had wandered through the woods and fields for several days, living on roots, bulbs, and whatever edible vegetation they could find. One morning, seeing that two soldiers were approaching, they hurriedly hid themselves in some nearby bushes. In their fright, the children could not be still, and soon their hiding place was exposed. One of the soldiers, a sergeant, prodded them into the open and brought the sad trio to his captain. Instantly, the officer realized that they were on the verge of starvation. He offered them a little donut, which the mother eagerly accepted. At once, she broke it into two pieces and gave a piece to each of her children. As her children quickly ate the bread, the mother watched with quiet contentment shining in her eyes. Surprised at what he was seeing, the sergeant inquired of the captain, "Is it because the mother is not hungry, Sir?" The captain replied, "No, sergeant, it is because she is a mother."

If we can appreciate that mother's selfless love for her children, then we can begin to understand the Father's divine love, which is offered to us through the Son. Far more than doughnuts and more than bread, Jesus offered his own body on the cross. When we take and drink in remembrance of Jesus (the crucified-yet-risen Lord), he is present with us, and we are in relationship with him. He reaches out to us and draws us

into an eternal embrace with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we love God and share God's love with others, then we have truly feasted on the bread of life!

Two weeks ago, I had the awesome privilege of being with eleven youth and two adults from our church at Montreat. In turn, we were part of a community of 1,100 other youth and adults, who participated in the Sr. High Youth Conference, week 5. That entire week, I/we feasted on the bread that came down from heaven. I was filled with joy at the sight and sounds of so many young people excited about their faith in Jesus Christ, pouring out their hearts to God in song and praise, and employing their minds to discern what God is calling them to do with their lives. I was truly blessed to be with so many young Christians whose passion for the Lord was refreshing and exhilarating. My own relationship with God was strengthened and deepened.

It's been said of Christians that we are beggars telling other beggars where to find bread. As we have taken Jesus up on his invitation, as we have feasted on this living bread, as we have shared in both an individual and yet communal relationship with the Lord, we are called to go and tell and serve others in his name. As we live in Jesus' presence, and love others in Jesus' name, we become more and more like him. We taste the bread of life and we share that holy food with others so they too may taste and see that the Lord is good, now and forever. What a difference the bread of life can make in our own lives and in the lives of others.

I shared this story with you some time ago but it bears repeating, especially when we are in relationship with Jesus Christ and have tasted far more than just regular bread! Dr. Fred Craddock tells of the time when he and his wife were in the Great Smoky Mountains and stopped at the Blackberry Inn in Tennessee. As they ate and relaxed before a grand picture window overlooking the valley below an old man came to the table and introduced himself. As they talked the man found out Craddock was a preacher and he said, "Let me tell you a story. I was born back here in the mountains," the man said. "My mother was not married. In those days that was about the greatest shame a person could carry. When we went to town people looked at her and then at me, and I could tell they were trying to guess who my father was. It was painful and humiliating. At school the children made fun of me and had a name for me I can't repeat. I hid. I ate my lunch alone. I started to go to church when I was 9 or 10 at a place called Laurel Springs. There was this preacher; he was a cranky, rough preacher. He had a bushy beard and a big voice. He scared me to death but fascinated me, too. I'd come in late to worship and leave right after the sermon because I was afraid somebody would speak to me and say, 'What's a boy like you doing in church? Who is your Daddy anyway?'" One Sunday, after the sermon, people began filling the aisles to go to the altar and I couldn't rush out as I usually did. I couldn't get by. I began to sweat and shake all over. I said to myself, 'Somebody's going to stop me and expose my shame before the whole congregation! Make fun of me and wonder out loud who my Father is!' Suddenly I felt this big hand on my shoulder, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and it was this preacher! He said for everybody to hear: 'Boy... boy, you're a child of... Boy, you're a child of God... And I see a striking resemblance.' He swatted me on the bottom and said: 'Go claim your inheritance.'" The old man paused and Craddock said to him, "What's your name?" The old man said, "Ben Hooper." Craddock said: "Ben Hooper – Ben Hooper – Oh yeah – Ben Hooper. I remember my father telling me about the people of Tennessee electing

an illegitimate Governor named Ben Hooper.” The old man smiled and softly said: “I was born that day in that church.” (Told by Dr. Fred Craddock)

Our Lord Jesus says to one and all: “Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3:20). If we open the door to him and enter into relationship with him, then we will feast on him who is the bread of life. We will forever rejoice in the love of God and share God’s goodness with others. And, we will give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – both now and for all eternity. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
August 9, 2009