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Life-Giving Bread

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." (John 6:35)

A properly baked French baguette can always turn me into sucker. Maybe it's the process of baking that appeals to me—with heat over 400° and added steam—that makes their crust crispy and the interior bread light. Or maybe the baguette's appeal is that you have to eat it on the day it is baked—while it is fresh—or else it loses its appeal quickly, like manna from heaven. Jennifer always shakes her head at me on Saturday mornings when I come in with a two-loaf bag.

"We'll never eat all of that," I hear every Saturday morning.

"I know; they're only a dollar a piece" I respond every Saturday morning. I think about responding with, "It's like having a trailer or pick-up truck," but I opt for the one that I know will end the conversation: "It's like having fresh flowers or a candle burning." The smell, the taste, the sight, the experience—it lasts only twenty-four hours, unless you slice, bag, and freeze the second long, slender loaf, which Jennifer usually does. Sidney and Scout, being sympathetic with my addiction to the delicate bread, usually get the first morsels.

Jesus' statement about being the bread of life and how this bread of life satisfies all hunger and thirst can't be properly understood unless the entire first part of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel is read. The writer begins with the story of Jesus feeding a crowd of five thousand people with only a few loaves and fishes. All four of the gospels contain this story. In fact, Mark's gospel contains two versions of it—one in chapter 6 and the other in chapter 8. In John's account, a young boy offers what he has to the disciple Andrew. Jesus asks the people to sit. He then takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread, and all are filled or satisfied with the food they have been provided. Twelve baskets-full are left over.

The story written initially for late first-century Jewish readers is an intended reminder of how God provided manna from heaven to the wandering Hebrews and how God will continue to care for them in their struggle with Roman oppression. Its purpose was similar to the short phrase in Jesus' model prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."

One of the lessons of "manna from heaven" in the wilderness is about learning to trust God, one day at a time, your whole life through. You remember that wilderness story. Soon after leaving Egypt, they began complaining about having no food and being led by Moses into the desert to die. They weren't just complaining; they were at the verge of rebelling against Moses' leadership and threatening to go back to Egypt to accept slavery over the unknown ways of the future.

When Moses talked to God about the problem, God said that provisions would be made. The people were to come out of their tents the next and each following morning and as the dew lifted gather only enough of the flaky substance for that day—no more. It would spoil if they tried to save or hoard the stuff. When the sun got hot, it melted. The limit was two quarts per day per person.

The only exception was for the Sabbath. They were to gather twice as much on the day before the Sabbath because no manna would be found on the seventh day. God intended for the Hebrew people to rest on the seventh day, then be back at it again on the first day. This lasted for forty-years—fourteen thousand, six hundred days, give or take a few. They ate raw manna, boiled manna, baked manna, ground manna. I don't think they were into fried foods at that point. It was how they survived until they came to the land of Canaan. Manna symbolized God's very practical care for the Israelites. At God's command, they kept two quarts of it to be placed right by the tablets of the law to remind each new generation, long after their wilderness years, of their dependence on God who gave them their daily bread.

The first lesson from this story is that God will supply our needs. We must be responsive to recognize and accept these gifts as they are provided, and we must remember that our dependence is to be on God, not the gifts or other things of this world. Even the best of stocks and investments can go sour.

The second lesson in this unfolding story comes at the point when the multitude (in John's account) wants to make Jesus their king. In many places in the four gospels, Jesus is likened to Moses and to the prophet Elijah. Gospel stories of miracles and events parallel the stories of these two Hebrew figures. When Jesus realized that the people were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew alone to the mountain. (John 6:15). When night came, the disciples got in their boat without Jesus and made their way to Capernaum. Jesus came to them on the water in the middle of a storm and soon afterwards they landed at Capernaum.

The next morning when the crowd realized that the disciples had left and Jesus was no longer around, they, too, went to nearby Capernaum and found him. Their questions started up again: "Rabbi, where does your power come from?" "How are you able to do the things you do?"

Jesus responded, "You've come following me because the bread I gave you yesterday filled your bellies. Don't spend your time and energy on things that do not last, but give yourselves to the things that last forever."

"What is it that we are to do, then?" they asked.

"Believe in me and follow my way," Jesus responded.

"How do we know that you are from God? You need to give us a sign, like Moses did by providing manna from heaven."

Jesus responded, "Moses wasn't the one who gave the bread. God provided the bread, and the bread God is offering you now gives life to the world."

"Give us this bread now," they said.

"You're looking at it. I am the bread," Jesus said. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In nineteenth century-century China, a name was given to persons who came to their Christian churches because they were hungry for material food. They converted, were baptized, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. But once their prosperity improved and they and their families no longer needed rice from the church, they drifted away. Missionaries referred to them as "rice Christians."

We are often guilty of promoting church for the wrong reasons—for the experience the “right” kind of worship...for the sake of a Christian America...for political engagement on behalf of the poor...or to participate in exciting mission trips. While all of these may be important and true, what we have to offer first and foremost is “soul food,” which lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world. It is soul food that we desire long after our bellies are full of rice and important programs of the church are accomplished.

Several weeks ago, a former associate pastor of mine now serving in Baltimore sent an email telling me about a weeklong silent retreat she had attended a few months back. I smiled reading the email trying to envision this hyper, red-headed, energetic young pastor who now has two small kids surviving seven days of silence. At twenty-six years old and nine months into her first called position as an associate, her Head-of-Staff died suddenly at the age of forty-nine. At the time, her own father in Chicago was struggling with a terminal illness and died six months later. For three months at age twenty-six, she was the sole pastor of a 750-member congregation before I arrived as Eastminster’s Intentional Interim Pastor.

Six years later, a weeklong silent retreat became a life-changing event for her. She wanted to tell me she was now applying for a doctoral program in Spiritual Formation at our Presbyterian seminary in San Francisco and was asking me to be her spiritual director—a requirement for that program.

What we think is most valuable in our lives often turns out to be of minor importance. Then, something comes along that stirs our hunger and thirst and we know we can never be satisfied again with a temporary fix. Listen to the way Jesus began his first sermon:

*Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
Happy are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Happy are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.
Happy are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.*

Listen to the Great Commandment Jesus gave:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Listen to Jesus' purpose for living:

I have come that you might life, life in all its fullness.

These are *not* the words of a one-night dinner invitation. These are life-changing words. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never again be thirsty."

"Give me that bread, Sir. Give me that water."

Prayer

Fill us with the bread of life, O Lord, with such understanding and knowledge that we may act as instruments of your loving desire for creation, working with you to transform our conceit into concern for others, our fear into love, our violence into peace, and our brokenness into wholeness. Through Christ we pray. AMEN.

Psalm 130:1-8

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

2 Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

8 It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

John 6:35, 41-51

35 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."

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" 43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 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."