

Weekend of Sunday, August 12, 2018
12th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 19/Proper 14/Year B
Primary Text: John 6:35, 41-51
Sermon Title: “I Am the Bread of Life”

Theme

Jesus says that the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh, and whoever eats this bread has eternal life now and will be raised on the last day. In Ephesians Paul tells us what this life Jesus gives us looks like, this life we live as those marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit in baptism. We live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. The whole purpose of life is giving yourself for the other.

Text

³⁵Jesus said to [the crowd,] “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

³⁶*But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.* ³⁷*Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away;* ³⁸*for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.* ³⁹*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.* ⁴⁰*This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”*

⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They 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’?” ⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It 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. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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.”

Sermon

To give you the best opportunity to understand this Gospel Reading, I want to go back in time a couple of weeks because the Gospel Readings we have been having and will continue to have for another couple of weeks tie together nicely in this month-long dialogue between Jesus and the Twelve and some would-be followers in which he uses bread as a metaphor for who he is and what a life of discipleship in him can do.

It all started back on the weekend of July 29 when the Gospel Reading was John's version of the feeding of the five-thousand. You might recall that after that miracle feeding John wrote,

John 6:14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” **15** When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Then later that evening, Jesus sent the Twelve on ahead across the sea so that he could retreat, reflect, commune with his Father, to re-engage ministry. Remember that? And then, in the night, the Twelve were caught in rough seas caused by high winds and oh, at the same time Jesus, who was out walking on the same turbulent sea, met up with them, got into their boat, calmed the sea, and immediately the boat was transported to their destination.

Meanwhile, back on the other side of the sea, some of the crowd that experienced that miracle feeding first-hand hung around overnight, and when they couldn't find Jesus the next morning they went looking for him. They noticed that no other boat had left and that was a mystery to them and that is where last week's Gospel Reading took place.

Some of you will remember last week's Gospel Reading, *a few of you were here, very few of you, the rest of you must have attended other churches, and maybe you heard the same Gospel Reading there*, but there was a rather tense moment when some of the same five-thousand people Jesus had fed on the banks of the sea on the other side followed him around the sea and encountered him the following morning. Just in case there were one or two of you who skipped church altogether last

weekend, I will remind you that in that way Jesus always had, he looked at the heart of those same people and said, "You aren't looking for me because in the sign I performed you recognize me for who I truly am. You just want breakfast! And then he said,

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.

You see, Jesus was right, and John the Gospeler recorded it correctly. They were going to make Jesus their king, but not because they recognized that he was God's Messiah, but because in him they saw their gravy train, their meal ticket, their sugar daddy! At the conclusion of my sermon last weekend, I said that Jesus will not be their genie in a bottle that they can conjure up when they need something and then put back when their needs are met.

Near the end of last week's Gospel Reading Jesus told them,

³²My Father ... 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." What a great response! Maybe this will go well for all!

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."

The last verse of last week's Gospel Reading is so important that it is repeated as the first verse of this week's Gospel Reading.

So, it seems as though Jesus took what could have been an ugly situation and turned it into a beautiful disciple-generating moment doesn't it? How wrong we would be.

Now, the lectionary editors, in their wisdom, decided to leave out the next five verses. I wish they would not have done that, so I am going to read them to you now. Jesus said,

³⁶But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I

*should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.
40This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him
may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."*

So let me remind you of the context. The people he was talking to were:

- mostly ignorant Jewish peasants,
- who probably only had a rudimentary knowledge of scripture,
- who only knew the theology that they had been taught by the priests and the rabbis
- and we know that Jesus thought they were totally wrong about his Father and the spiritual life they were to teach and lead,
- they had been away from home all the day before,
- spent a stormy night on the sea shore,
- got up and walked around the sea for hours looking for Jesus,
- and then he seems to have insulted them!

"You say you want this bread that I am speaking of and that is because you think it's some kind of magic bread that will just keep you satisfied. I have already told you, I AM THAT BREAD OF LIFE and yet you do not believe."

How do you think that dialogue is going? Have you ever been in negotiations with someone or some group, like a labor union, and it all starts with the good intentions of everyone, and then ... things take a turn? I have.

Beginning in verse 41 and through the rest of the reading we have this hostile dialogue between people who think Jesus has the ability to be the end of all their wants and needs, and Jesus who is telling them a totally different truth.

The Jews stepped back and looked Jesus up and down and asked themselves, "Isn't this Jesus whose father and mother we know? Where does he come off claiming to be the Son of God?"

And if we can put ourselves in their sandals, maybe we can understand. He looks like a regular guy like we are! How can he be all that he claims to be?

Jesus was not shocked by this line of questioning, in fact he matter-of-factly agrees; "Faith comes from the Father. Some of you will simply not be able to see God in me."

And then, while he already had them irritated he continued,

⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. Then pointing to himself, he said, ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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."

Now, if you can once again get by your 21st Century Christian faith and put yourselves in their sandals, you would have to admit, these words of Jesus are about the craziest claims you have ever heard.

But none of that matters for us today. The issue before us today is the claims of Jesus and whether we have the audacity to believe them. And not just believe in him, but become one with him in mission and ministry.

Saturday morning some of you were setting up for the Changing Hearts event in the parking lot, and a few were surprised that people were already showing up at 10AM for an event that started at 11AM, about which I said that what many people, like our food distribution clients, live with is an attitude of scarcity. They will come early because they want the best first, not trusting that there will be enough.

This story that is our Gospel Reading is not about bread at all, at least not the kind that we eat for physical nourishment. As Jesus said, "You will eat that bread and live for a while and you will get hungry again. Eat of me, the bread of life, and you will live forever."

Now I could stop here and some of you might compliment me on a good sermon. It's not. Not yet, at least.

When one metaphorically feeds on Jesus, and let me not speak anymore in metaphor because it confused those Jesus was trying to reach, he meant that we are to study his example and learn from his teachings and have our faith in him

encouraged by his signs and miracles *so that* little by little we become more like him.

I do not believe that Jesus wanted a welfare system like the folks he was talking to wanted, where he would just feed them every meal. Jesus worked, yes worked, for a living and he was mentoring the Twelve to continue that work. He taught that those who have been blessed with much – be that the ability to work and make money – need use that ability to work and make money to share with those who cannot work. Yes, some are really sick or lame or whatever, yes they need to be taken care of, so that they can be made as whole as they can be. Oh, the many times Jesus healed someone *so that* they could once again enter society and contribute themselves.

And I do not believe that Jesus wanted the Roman government to feed all their subjects on the sea shore that day. In Mark's and Matthew's version of the feeding miracle, Jesus said the people don't need to be sent away. Listen church, he said, "You give them something to eat. They need to be with me. They have much to learn. There are many that seek healing of all sorts. I need to make them whole. You feed them, so that they can stay with me and become more like me." That was his purpose in feeding the five-thousand!

Now I'm going to say something in a moment that I am sure will be taken out of context and for which I will be criticized. Are you ready?

The problem with most ministries like Second Harvest or our own food distribution ministry is, that while we do a great job of giving a hand-out, we don't do a good enough job at giving a hand-up. We do a great job of feeding people for a day, but don't do enough to feed them that which will sustain them unto eternal life. I believe it can be done – and at least we could try.

In this Gospel Reading, Jesus refused to give another hand-out, and instead he offered a hand-up. "Follow me, and my example and I will demonstrate for you a better way." In the end, it did not go well for him, and I think that is because we don't want to do the hard work of discipleship, not us the members of the church, not us for the benefit of those outside the church. The hand-out is easier.

In the Old Testament Reading, God had a mission for the prophet Elijah, and so he gave him enough food to get started and it was sufficient for the whole forty-day journey. I wonder if we too live with an attitude of scarcity. "If I donate more of my money or time or talent to do what I feel God is calling me to do, there won't be enough for me to do the things I want to do." I know, I am as guilty as anyone.

And in the Second Reading, the Apostle Paul wrote that we are to speak truth to our neighbors. Thieves must give up stealing. If you can work, work honestly – *so that* you can then have something to share with the needy. That's not paying it back, though I see nothing wrong with that: I see it as paying it forward. We've been blessed to be a blessing to others.

I was talking to some of the Changing Hearts people from NBOM and Zion who worked the event we hosted Saturday morning and there were some visitors who just came to see what free things we offered. They whipped through, looked at the tables for whatever free stuff we offered and moved on.

- Did they stop at Carol Norman's table and get information about many health problems?
- Did they stop at Renee Duzzny's health screening table?
- Did they stop at Sandy Bieltz's mental health table?

Some did, but many just looked to see what freebies they had to offer. Many of our visitors, not unlike those who Jesus dealt with in the Gospel Reading, got what they wanted and then rejected the real lasting help we had to offer.

Do you know that I have invited some, whom I consider regular abusers of our benevolence, to never come back for help from us? Bold I know, I hope God forgives me if I'm wrong. But I will not encourage their bad behavior. But I digress. This reading is not about them; it's about us.

This reading is about being disciples of Jesus Christ and becoming more like him in every moment of progress we make. And we are not just working on our own discipleship, when Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission he charged us to help others find their way too. And when we do that, we can, like Elijah did in the First Reading, trust God for enough to get us to the end of our mission's journey.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Oh man, I've never had such a heavy awesome assignment for you. I want to encourage you to do what I always encourage you to do:

- Read your Bible daily because in doing that you will learn about God's plan for your lives and all creation through the teaching of the prophets and the apostles and preeminently through the life and ministry of Jesus, our Lord.
- And I want to encourage you to do your daily devotions, however and whatever device you use to do that, because it will humble you daily and puts you in a right relationship with God.
- And be in prayer for those that are in need of prayer, and situations in our community and around the world – this softens your hearts and leads you to more compassionate living.
- And especially today, pray that God would show you how to live out your life of discipleship demonstrating godly living under the example of his son, Jesus.
- And finally risk doing whatever God lays on your heart, no matter how hard it might be.

I know I've said a lot and given you a big assignment. But God revealed in Jesus Christ is even bigger and will strengthen you to the end of your journey.

Prayer

Loving God, we came here today to worship and confess and hear your words of forgiveness and go home feeling good about ourselves for another week, and then you give that pastor this word for us!

Bring greater clarity to us that we might know and understand better what you have in mind, and give us the tenacity to speak the truth with love and compassion to all we encounter. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen