

“The Bread of Life, Part 1”

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Sunday, August 5, 2018

Ephesians 4:1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

John 6:24-35

So 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.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus 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. Do 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.’ 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.’ So 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? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”’ Then 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. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

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.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we have within, the words we offer in song and in prayers, the words that we've heard read from the Gospel and the Epistle, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living Word of God. The Word of Jesus Christ. The Word of life. And let that word speak to us. Let that word grow within us. Let that word bear fruit of goodness. Through us into this world that so desperately needs to know of your love and care. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

As I've said many times before, the Gospel of John, without question, is my favorite gospel. And the parts of the Gospel of John that I love the most are the parts where there is something to do with feeding. Whether it be Jesus at the end coming back after the resurrection, standing on the beach and feeding the disciples on a campfire where they're wondering is it him or not, to the feeding of the 5,000. The stories about Jesus feeding others are those stories that capture my imagination. I think one of the greatest miracles in the Gospel happens in the second chapter of John where Jesus doesn't feed people. Instead, he goes to a wedding party that's out of wine and he says, "Here, we're going to make 250 gallons more so that the celebration continues." There's something powerful about God and Christ showing up, feeding and providing drink to those who are gathered.

And in this story, in the Gospel of John, we have this sort of ending, if you will, of the feeding of the 5,000. And while I love the stories about the feeding where Jesus says, "Well, where are we going to get the food?" And one of the disciples

says, "Well, there's a kid with five barley loaves and two fish" And Jesus is like, "All right, get those and bring them here, five loaves and two fish, we can feed 5,000 people." While I love those, there are parts of the story, especially what we hear today, that I kind of cringe at. Maybe you cringe at these sort of statements, too. Part of what I cringe at is I wonder, when did Jesus become the King James Bible? "Verily, verily I say unto thee, you are looking at me. Not because you saw--" I mean, it sounds-- The language in this is really difficult. "Very, truly I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, but it was my father." Oh, I want Jesus here to be a little more human and less Old English, so to speak. Because it sets us up to hear him say, "I am the bread of life." As if the trumpets should be blaring before he says anything. Dah-duh-duh-duh-dah-duh-duh-duh-dah, "I am the bread of life!"

I just want you to notice up there in that center window where his hands are, they are not up here in triumph. They are not up here in victory. They are not up here because trumpets have blown and he has proclaimed, "I am the bread of life." No, they are down by his side. At least one of them is, I can't see the other one. They both are, thank you. In the sign of service. In a sign of openness. So, when he says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty," that kind of statement makes me cringe. Never? So, if I partake of this bread of life, I will never be hungry and I'll never be thirsty? I'll never have needs? I'll never have doubts? Everything will be taken care of? I'll be taken care of? So, what I realize is when we hear this particular part of the Gospel of John, we need to hear it in light of the feeding of the 5,000 and what that points to, back in the Old Testament, to understand what Jesus is telling us when he says, "I am the bread of life and you won't be hungry and you won't be thirsty." I don't believe that he's making a proclamation. I believe, instead, that he's offering us the Gospel. Good News.

When all those people came to find Jesus on that hill, they wanted to hear from him. They had heard stories about him. What he could do. How he was doing it. He was healing the sick and caring for the poor. The blind could see. The lame could walk. They wanted to know what is going on. So, they wanted to hear from this teacher. Something was happening. And so they went, 5,000 of them, they sat down because it was getting late. The disciples were concerned about feeding everyone. We should disband them and send them away. And Jesus says, "No", because there's a kid here with five barley loaves and two fish. And so, Jesus takes those loaves and breaks them and hands them to the disciples. He says a prayer of thanksgiving over the fish. He hands them to the disciples. The disciples take that food out into the crowd and the crowd starts to eat together. And the scripture says that when they were eating, afterwards, they were satisfied. Not just full in their tummies, but they were satisfied.

And then afterwards, because they wanted to immediately grab Jesus and make him king of the people, he was so amazing and so good to them, he left. Disappeared. They couldn't find him. So, they went over the lake, to the other side. They find him again and they're clamoring after him. And this is the discourse that emerges. "When did you get here? Oh, you don't really care about me, you just came because of that amazing thing that just happened." "Yeah, but what must we do to understand what's going on?" "Well, you've got to believe me. You've got to trust me. You've got to trust the one who sent me." And then he tells them that he is, in fact, the manna that comes down from heaven. "I am the bread of life."

Now what we may miss in all of this is that most likely the crowd that follows Jesus are the people of Israel who were in the crowd that got fed. They know the stories of the past. They wonder what's happening. They have heard that their ancestors were in the wilderness and manna fell from heaven when they were hungry and starving and questioning why they had left Egypt. And when would they get to the Promised Land? Everything was chaotic and desperate. In between the bondage of Egypt and the liberation of the promises of God. And right in that in-between time, in the wild places of life, in the wilderness, when they were hungry, bread from heaven dropped down. And they ate. And they were satisfied. In the midst of their journey, from a system of oppression where they were taken advantage of, on their way trusting in God's promise to live a new life in a land that's flowing with milk and honey, before they got there, bread falls from the sky and feeds and sustains and nourishes each of them.

In a sense, what Jesus is saying to these people of Israel and to us is, "I am with you in the in-between times. I am with you in between the struggle for liberation in your life and the promises that are yet to

come." Because let's face it, we are a people who live in between the destruction of sin at work in our lives and in our world and in our communities. And the fulfilling promises of God. We're right in the middle. And when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," we need to look beyond the bread or the loaf, so to speak. And look at the giver of the gift. Don't look at the bread. But look at the one who offers the bread. In this sense, the one who offers himself.

Like I said, these phrases and how they're worded in the the gospel story, they make me cringe. But if we sit with them long enough, we realize that Jesus is not making these declarations. He's offering us all goodness. And so, we need to look beyond the declaration to see the goodness that is being offered. And I want to share a story about what that looks like in modern, 2018 Kirkwood life.

I got a message about week one after surgery that somebody wanted to bring me recuperation ribs. And so, Jani and I snuck down to church because they had been delivered here and went into the refrigerator and got couple bags that said Holyan on them. And we took them home and opened them up. And there, wrapped in tinfoil was a slab of recuperation ribs. You thought I had this because I was sweating. It's actually because I'm salivating [laughter]. They were unbelievable. Dry rubbed and cooked to perfection. The kind where you go to lift some out after cutting them and you grab the bone and you pull and you end up with just bone. Because all the goodness stuck together. The crust was amazing. Spicy yet just the perfect hint of sweetness and goodness. They were delicious. And it would be easy to focus on that gift, the ribs. How amazing they were. How wonderful they were. How nice it was that we didn't have to cook. But it wasn't until about three days later when it dawned on me that that person didn't have to do that. That those ribs were simply an act of kindness. They were offered in goodness. And just as much as they filled our tummies with good food, it also filled my soul with hope. And it reminded that you can get in a pretty dark place when you're recovering from your third surgery to your spine, it reminded me that I am not alone. I don't think he'd go for it. Maybe he would. I can't quite hear Jesus saying, "I am the ribs of life [laughter]." But the message of those ribs and the message of Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life," is exactly the same. "I see you. I care for you. I love you. I am with you in this and you are not alone." To me, brothers and sisters, this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.