

Be the Bread

John 6:35, 41-51

This morning, there's been a theme – a subtle refrain – humming beneath the entire liturgy. Have you noticed it? It's a theme tied to our scripture reading for today, but it may have escaped your particular notice because of familiarity – because of its simple, everyday, ordinariness. It's a theme that is pervasive throughout scripture. Because today you have the entire liturgy written out for you, I invite you to go back through it – maybe over lunch – and notice all the references there are to food and drink, and especially to bread, our daily bread, manna from heaven, the bread of life.

Truth is, we come to be fed. We come to feast on the Word of God. We come to drink deeply of the waters of life. We come with our hungers and our thirsts – knowing in some molecular level of our beings that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God...

Today we encounter Jesus in the gospel of John, a gospel which is so different from Matthew and Mark and Luke. A gospel which frames the life of Christ as the Living Word – the Word that became flesh and lives among us. In the Gospel of John, we encounter Jesus who IS the Word – and let me tell you, he talks a lot. Contrary to the other gospels, in this one Jesus provides long monologues that can fall strangely on our ears, and that evidently shocked his original listeners as well. Feast on the Living Word for you today... come and be filled... as we read from the Gospel of John, chapter 6, from Today's New International Version:

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"...At this, the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

"Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. "No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.

I tell you the truth, whoever believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which people may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Bread. Bread for the World. The staff of life. Bread is that essential food, found in virtually every culture, that has been around since the Neolithic period. How many of you ate bread as part of your breakfast this morning? Mmm, nothing more satisfying than ripping into a hot crusty hunk of bread, fresh from the oven. Bread is central to our culture, and was even more so for those who flocked after Jesus in ancient Palestine.

You see, they were hungry. Just immediately before this scene, Jesus fed five thousand people on the slopes overlooking the Sea of Galilee. With a few table scraps, he demonstrated God's providence and abundance until they had eaten their fill. My translation says they ate as much as they wanted—until they were satisfied. But it's clear they weren't satisfied for long. They continued to flock after him by droves, pursue him relentlessly. And Jesus knows why: You're looking for me, not because you recognized signs of the kingdom of God at work, but because you want more bread.

Jesus knows, he understands... he's offering this miraculous bread from heaven bread that will always satisfy and never run out - but they want food for their bellies. And he knows that they will never be able to hear the Good News as long as their stomachs are empty.

In thinking about these words of Jesus, I was reminded of a story I heard Pastor Will Willimon recount of a mission trip to Haiti that he took his church. One day the church group prepared two great pots of rice and drove them out to a cluster of huts beside a dry riverbed. Immediately, their truck was surrounded by dozens of people, many of them naked, all of them starving. He says: "They frantically pushed in amongst us, thrusting their little eating bowls toward us. In a hectic five minutes, they emptied over two hundred pounds of rice. Then they fell silent and moved back to their huts and we drove away. I will never get that sight out of my mind. To stare starvation in the face, to see what bread means to hungering persons, is to know the radical quality of Jesus' statement: I am the bread."¹

Jesus didn't say I am like bread. He said, I am the bread—the bread of life.

Now, it's tempting for us to relegate Jesus' words to some spirituality that does not have much to do with physical hunger. It's much more comfortable for us to do so, especially in a world where roughly one billion people—one fifth of our fellow human beings—go to bed hungry every night. Today—this day—almost 25,000 people will die of hunger². If you remember the horror of the tsunami in 2004 that claimed 220,000 lives - that's 31 hunger tsunamis every year.

That truth stands as an accusation of us—this nation of over-eaters—especially when we know that we have the technology in the United States and other developed countries to eradicate hunger.³ This is one of the Millennium Development Goals, one that was sacrificed in order to bail out Wall Street. Give us this day our daily bread.

Wait a minute, wait a minute! Jesus is talking about spiritual things, isn't he? He's not talking about real bread – he's not offering himself to be consumed in a literal way, come on! ... Or is he? ... In the Gospel of John, Jesus is repeatedly telling us who he is—and he does so in very concrete terms, in words that relate directly and specifically to our experience of embodied, flesh-and-blood life. Our God-made-flesh goes to great pains to help us understand that God is real, embodied, touchable—as Thomas found out. Twenty-six times, Jesus explains who he is with the phrase “I AM” – I am the light, I am the Door, the Gate, I am the Shepherd, I am the Vine. I am the Bread. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” Or, as Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev pointed out: “Bread for myself is a material question. Bread for my neighbor is a spiritual one.”⁴ Jesus is the bread.

Jesus is the bread that ties us firmly to life. Jesus is there, on the hillside, passing a few loaves and fishes to feed five thousand people. Jesus is at the table of the religious leaders, eat and drinking and discussing the realities of God. Jesus is on the shore, cooking fish for his friends' breakfast. Jesus joins the two on the Emmaus Road, and they suddenly recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Jesus passes bread to his disciples at the Passover table: This is my Body, broken for you.

For two thousand years, we have experienced Jesus to be present in the breaking of the bread. Each time we gather as a people around the table, we remember that we are sustained and nourished by the bread broken and the wine poured out. That is called sacrament – the inward, invisible presence of God made manifest and experienced in the outward, visible sign of grace. And because we are what we eat, we become, in spite of ourselves, the Body of Christ, blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world.

When the disciples saw the hunger of the crowds that followed Jesus, they asked him to send them away so that they would be able to find food for themselves. And do you know what Jesus replied? “You give them something to eat” (Mk. 6:37). If we are the Body of Christ – and we are – then we are the bread. We are the ones called to give them something to eat, we are the ones to be blessed, broken and shared with the hungry in the world.

I know in many ways we do that – and in ways I don’t know about, you do that. But we all stand challenged to go deeper, to reach farther, to offer more, to give ourselves and what we have for the life of the world ... Don’t strive do it, follow Jesus and become it. I AM the bread of life. And the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh. Offer the bread, break the bread, share the bread, be the Bread. In a world full of hunger. You. The Body of Christ for the life of the world. Be the bread.

¹Will Willimon. Wonder Bread. August 9, 2009. Published at logosproductions.com.

²Hunger Facts: International. <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/hunger-facts-international.html>. Cited 8-7-09.

³Nicole Coia, *UN Statistics reveal extent of World Hunger*. Catholic News Service, citing statistics from the World Food Program and the Office of the UN Secretary General. <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0900507.htm>. Cited 8-7-09.

⁴Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, *Nothing is Ordinary*. Theolog: Blogging toward Sunday. <http://theolog.org/2009/08/bloggig-toward-sunday-nothing-is.html>. Cited 8-7-09