

Last Week I mentioned that our Sunday gospel lessons will focus on bread for more than a month. That's why I called this the summer of bread. So let's talk about bread, not the stuff in bags at the grocery stores, but real bread baked at home. Bread reminds me of my childhood. Going back for generations all the women in my family bake bread. Or, at least we try to, as bread baking isn't always successful.¹ Especially in the beginning.

Those of you who tried to learn baking bread during the pandemic might remember a couple of failed attempts. Still, there's nothing quite like the smell of fresh baked bread. I savor the intoxicating aroma and the joy of eating a warm piece of bread straight from the oven. For me bread symbolizes family as well as nourishment.

Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life." means that he will feed and nourish us.

Picture this: crowds are gathered to hear Jesus teach. After Jesus fed the 5,000 they tried to forcefully make him king. Jesus ran away, as they wanted to force his kingship on their terms. The next day there are still some in the crowd interested in Jesus. They are interested in him, Jesus says, because they ate their fill of loaves. In other words, because of their stomachs. Jesus teaches them to focus on heavenly matters, more than earthly matters. Rather than work for food that will perish, he says to work for the food that endures for eternal life. We often teach children to get their heads out of the clouds, as they can often neglect earthly matters in favor of heavenly daydreaming. Here, Jesus is teaching them to get their heads in the clouds, to focus on heavenly matters, more than physical matters of hunger.²

Then Jesus does something brilliant. He connects his ministry to the present. Listen carefully to a single verse from our gospel, John 6:32, Jesus said, "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." At the surface this sounds pretty straight forward. God gave bread from heaven in the form of manna to Moses and the Israelites long ago. And the Father gives true bread from heaven. But there is a very important detail that changes the meaning here. Jesus is not saying that God the Father did this miraculous thing long ago and stopped providing. Instead, Jesus is speaking in the present tense here. Listen again to the end of the verse, "it is my Father who *gives you* the true bread from heaven."

The father *gives you* this true bread, not *gave you* this true bread. Jesus isn't telling the people a history lesson alone.

He is saying that the same God who provided to Moses long ago is still speaking, still feeding us, with true bread.

(Pause)

In fact, that true bread is with you right here and right now. That true bread represents the presence of God. In Exodus, when Moses wanted to convince people of God's presence he was given two words, "I am."

¹ Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

A quote from Dr. Lewis' work that inspired me to write this section: "The crowd finds Jesus on the other side of the sea, indicating the mutuality of relationship between Jesus and those who believe. There is much about the Bread of Life discourse that mimics the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. There is an intermingling of dialogue and discourse, so that noticing the pattern of conversation can lead to certain interpretive possibilities. In other words, the preacher needs to attend carefully to the questions, comments, and responses by all parties to track the progression of the discourse."

² This idea comes from: Sloyan, G. (1988). *John: Interpretation A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Those two words revealed the living presence of God. Today Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

Right here, right now, present tense.

God is with you in the flesh, feeding your hearts and souls.

Consider the Lord’s Prayer. We don’t say, “You gave us bread a really long time ago and that was awesome.” No, this prayer is about the here and now. Instead, we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” God provides for us every single day.

(Pause)

During Communion we say together these words, “Christ has died, Christ is risen.”³ Once again, notice the tense. Christ has died, and Christ is risen. While Christ has done amazing things in the past, he is risen, present tense, with us. There is a much larger point in all of these grammatical details.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is living into the present. Jesus is the bread of life, warm fresh baked bread each day. Not stale old bread which nostalgically longed for the good old days. Fresh bread, the bread of life.

Also, we must avoid another tendency. Some Christians focus excessively on the afterlife. Yes, the afterlife is important, we affirm our faith with the words of the Nicene Creed, saying, “We look for the resurrection of the dead.” Yet again, it is what we are looking for, while we continue to do all the other things we say in the creed: believing in one God, the Holy Spirit, acknowledge our baptism,⁴ and so much more - all set in present tense.

Far more important to Jesus in his ministry was to inspire passion and devotion for God each day. If Jesus only came to earth to focus only on the afterlife, then he never would have said, “I am the bread of life.” Instead, he would have had to say something different. Jesus would have had to say, “I am frozen bread.” Yes, some of us freeze bread to enjoy later. But it sits in the freezer buried by the food we eat each day, often buried and forgotten.

No, Jesus is not frozen food at all. A relationship with Jesus is more than something that happens after we die, even though that matters. And a relationship with Jesus is so much more than what happened long ago, even though that is important. A relationship with Jesus is a daily, here and now relationship who brings God’s very presence in our midst. Not stale bread, or frozen bread, Jesus is our daily bread. Jesus is our passion. He is the center of our hearts and lives.

(Pause)

Now, the way we believe in Jesus, even as Christians are vastly different.⁵

³ *Book of Common Prayer* (1979). p.363

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*. (1979). p.358-359

⁵ Our relationship to Jesus and our dialogue can be seen as different by comparing this dialogue to that of the Samaritan woman and Jesus. This idea comes from several people including: Hoch, R. (2021).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-2/commentary-on-john-624-35-5> My thoughts are: We want to be spiritually as well as physically filled. This story has a parallel to the Samaritan woman dialogue. She too, was searching her heart for fulfillment, but was stuck on the physical necessities of life.

The shape of the speeches, the way Jesus and the Samaritan woman talk compared to how Jesus and the crowd interact is remarkably similar. Both include a mix of arguing and teaching from Jesus. We only hear Jesus’ first response, yet we hear them later ask for eternal bread, clearly missing the point. This is when Jesus points out the fault in their thinking.

Let’s look further at the shape and content of dialogue. Listen to the similarities even in the content of dialogue. The crowd follows Jesus and Woman approaches Jesus. Jesus tells the crowd they are concerned with their stomachs and want a magic trick. He emphasizes the physical aspect of the issue. In the same manner, Jesus

Children are often our best examples at living in the here and now. My husband and I have two daughters, an 8 year old rule follower named Grace, and a 3 year old named Faith who is aware that rules exist, so let's just say she is full of the Holy Spirit. When Grace expressed interest in communion we had her wait. We wanted her to long for the bread of life and to better understand this great mystery of God. She did. We had deep theological conversations and Grace was more than ready to receive when the time came. I wept the day she received her first communion with her Godparents standing nearby as she received the elements.⁶

Then there was Faith. For months she had been trying to trick my husband into giving her the bread. In fact, while I was at a seminary gathering that included communion she kept shouting, "I want Jesus" through the entire Eucharistic prayer. At each service she went away empty handed.

That changed when Bishop Fisher came to visit my husband's church. My mother-in-law took the girls to church, and Grace dutifully sat in her pew, then calmly approached the line to receive the Bread of Life. Faith noticed that in addition to my husband the Bishop was handing out communion bread. So Faith made a break for it. Spunky little Faith bounced down the aisle in the line for communion. She ran ahead of my mother-in-law, avoided my husband and then reached out her hand, like a running back stretching a football over the goal line.

I imagine her saying what she often says, "I want Jesus." Bishop Fisher gave her the wafer and she took it and put it in her mouth. Mission accomplished. That is the story of Faith's first communion. My husband and I were just thankful she didn't spit it out or throw it on the ground. I have to give her credit. Faith wanted Jesus in the here and now.

Her unbridled passion led her to receive Jesus.

God wants us to have that same unfiltered passion for Christ.

He wants us to be so filled with Christ, the bread of life that we can get around any obstacle.

emphasizes the physical aspect of the water and tells the woman she will be thirsty again. Jesus reminds the crowd to seek with their hearts. To never hunger again spiritually means finding Jesus. Similarly, the woman is told to never thirst again spiritually by seeking Jesus with our hearts. This is because Jesus can be the filling of our spiritual needs and this can flow to the way we are satisfied physically.

Jesus here is asking the crowd, as he asked the woman to see him with their hearts rather than only worrying about their physical needs. It is both and for Jesus: yes, worry about what to eat, just don't only worry about what to eat.

Speaking of language, the way Jesus talks to the crowd is important. Imagine the way you talk to someone you love and are teaching a lesson. The way we speak to someone is important. The emphasis we place on a word, the tone of our voice. Jesus' interaction with his followers is equally important. Jesus invites his followers to actively believe in him with their whole hearts.

⁶ Look at the Exodus story to see how God, the Father, relates to his beloved children. Here are my thoughts: Jesus still calls them into a relationship with him. Jesus says yes when others say I am not ready. Jesus echoing the "I am" language used by The Father in Exodus means that we are connected regardless of the years of separating behaviors. This story is a gift for the present and has no strings attached. Jesus is asking the crowd to believe in him because he loves them without condition. He is telling them that their love for him will mend their brokenness. They would forever hunger and try to be filled with the wrong "food." without this love for Christ. If all relationships are grounded in heaven, it would benefit us to sincerely try to root our relationship with God in good soil. If we connect our hearts to God the rest will grow from this experience. Faith could feel Christ better through communion. The children at Godly Play work and understand Jesus through his story. We know who Jesus is in our hearts. They come from: Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus is inviting the crowd into the miracle of the present.⁷

Jesus wants us to know that the physical bread, both from the feeding of the multitude and the manna is prophetic of the everlasting bread and wine. And note how the bread and wine is there for everyone, not simply an elite class.⁸ Again, Jesus is radically inviting all into the kingdom of heaven.

So today, as we go forth from this place how can our faith inspire us to move forward and live passionately with Jesus present in our lives? We can live into God's call as we care for each other in our jobs, in our families, and our ministries here at church. We can passionately run toward the bread of life and proclaim, "I want Jesus." Amen.

⁷ This inspired by the following section:

The Gospel of John highlights this communicative function by calling Jesus' mighty deeds "signs." Jesus himself speaks of them as his "works," a term which links his deeds to the "works" of God in creation as in God's wondrous works praised in Psalm 107. The word "sign" (from the Greek *semeion*) indicates that its purpose is to *show* to be a sign of or toward something beyond itself.

From Kittredge, C.B. (2007). *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of John*. Harrisburg: Morehouse.

⁸ Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. p.79