## 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 sea, 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.

Flour, salt, sugar, oil, yeast, water. Plain, simple ingredients combine to produce a food that is a staple of life around the world. For those of us concerned with not consuming too many carbs, bread may not seem the ideal food for our daily meals, but in dire enough circumstances, we would be thrilled to have it, as are many people who cannot afford a more well-balanced diet. Bread represents the fuel our bodies need to function from one day to the next. Bread as food is the great equalizer – none of us can go on for long without it. While we might wax poetic about the merits of our favorite form of the stuff – sourdough, French, ciabatta, brioche, biscuits, whole-wheat, gluten-free – if we were faced with starvation, we would take anything made with any combination of those basic ingredients.

A true story, a favorite of mine, illustrates this beautifully: During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of those who had lost so much could not sleep at night. The children feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night, the bread reminded them, “Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.”

Long, long before that, the Israelites made their slow way through the wilderness. At times they had nothing to eat, no fuel to help them put one foot in front of another on their long journey. They begged Moses to figure something out. What good was being released from slavery if they were going to die in the desert? Maybe it would be better for them to return to Egypt, where life wasn't great but at least they knew they would eat every day. Moses begged God for help and God sent food for the starving travelers. There was nothing gourmet about this manna. Scholars aren't even sure if it technically *was* bread, but those who ate the substance they found on the ground each morning considered it “bread from heaven.” (At least they did when they first received it, before they got tired of it and grumbled to Moses about the lack of variety in their daily diet, but that's for another sermon.) In spite of their intermittent ingratitude, the Israelites were able to say, “Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.”

After some time had passed, the people whom Jesus had fed on the mountaintop got hungry again, so they headed out to look for him. There was something disingenuous about their meeting with Jesus. Though the people tried to make it look as if they wanted to hear more of what the mysterious preacher had to say, Jesus was on to them. “You're not looking for me because you saw something about me that intrigued you,” Jesus told them, “but because you liked what I gave you and you want more.”

There was a scolding tone to Jesus' words, yet he understood completely that the body requires food in order to function. After all, he was human and he and his disciples daily faced the need to find food so they would be strong enough to continue their work. At times, Jesus' and the disciples' needs centered around the basics: food, rest and shelter. Jesus knew that that is what all people need to sustain life; he also understood that once people have those basics, they need more in order to have richer, more meaningful lives. Faced with the crowd that had tracked him down, Jesus saw a teachable moment and told them that he could feed not only their bodies but also their souls. What the people did not yet grasp was that the one before them was the one who could satisfy all the deepest hungers of body and spirit.

Jesus related the story of the manna in the wilderness that kept the Israelites alive until they could reach the promised land. “You think Moses gave the people that manna?” Jesus asked the crowd. “No, God gave it. And God is giving you far more than that. God is giving you the bread that comes straight from heaven.”

I'm not sure the people understood what Jesus was saying when he went from talking about bread and fish on a mountainside to manna in the desert to himself as the bread of life. I'm not sure we understand it, but that does not diminish the brilliant truth of what he is saying. Jesus gives us all we need, not just to survive but to thrive. In Jesus is all knowledge, all truth about God's abundant love. Jesus is all we need to know about grace and community and feeding one another. We receive that love through the one who feeds us with his very own body and blood, giving his human life so we humans might live to be the embodiment of his love in the world.

You and I cannot really separate our need for Jesus into the physical and the spiritual, for he shows us through his own life that those needs are intertwined and that he is the only one who can meet us in our every need. A writer named Bruno Barnhart, a monk and spiritual director who died a few years ago, wrote about the essential nature of Jesus, the Bread of Life. Barnhart said this:

“The incarnate *Word* of God is *bread*. The Word is already food and drink in the Old Testament, but there the threshold of understanding is lower: the images may be taken as metaphor. Here the metaphor, the symbol, has become a physical reality and even a person. It refuses to be spiritualized or allegorized: I am your food. I have come to be consumed and assimilated: first into your hearts and minds through listening and faith; then into your very bodies which I will transform into my own. … Jesus is the divine light and life made visible, audible, touchable … and finally ingestible. To “see” him, to listen to his words and believe in him, and thus to feed upon him, is to begin to *surrender the boundaries* of one’s own consciousness and one’s own being.”

Barnhart's reading is so rich that I had to read this passage a couple of times for it to begin to sink in, so I'll read it again for you.

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The Bread of Life feeds not just our spirits but also our bodies and in so doing transforms them into his own. That is what is happening here today. We gather to be fed by the Word of God, through what we hear read and proclaimed and sung. We come to the table and in that tiny wafer and smidgen of wine Jesus enters our bodies and souls and fills us with divine light and life. Later, we will break bread with one another and, in the sharing of food and something of ourselves with one another, the connections we share with each other and with God are made stronger, unbreakable even. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is our manna in the wilderness, the very life and love of God living in us every day. Jesus has present and future in his hands and in his heart and he will give us what we need to survive and to grow in faith and love and ministry, even if we can't imagine right now what that might be. Because he loves us, we can believe that he will care for us, tenderly and completely.

Tonight, when each of us goes to bed, we will have the great good fortune to be able to hold close the bread with which we have been fed today and say, “Today I ate and tomorrow I will eat again.” And then tomorrow and every tomorrow after that, we will get up and work together so that more and more of God's children will have what they need to joyfully say the very same thing.

Amen.

*Pentecost 11B*

*August 5, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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