

“Bread of Life”

John 6:35-71

6/24/18

I am someone who has always enjoyed bread! I love rolls and cinnamon buns. I have enjoyed dense crusty bread in Germany, lighter Italian bread in...Italy, and braided bread in Israel. In the Mayan villages where we go on our mission trips to Mexico, we enjoy fresh corn tortillas each year, which the Mayan people eat like bread with every meal.

This morning's passage from John 6 focuses on bread, following Jesus' miracle of feeding bread to 5,000 people in the first part of the chapter. After that miracle, Jesus talks about the true bread that God the Father gives from heaven. The crowd to whom Jesus speaks wants in on that! In this morning's passage Jesus expands on this idea and makes some startling and troubling claims. He delivered these remarks in the synagogue at Capernaum, along the Sea of Galilee. The ruins of Capernaum and that synagogue can still be viewed today.

We pick up the story in John 6:35. ³⁵*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. 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. 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.*” (John 6:35-40)

Jesus begins by saying, “I am the bread of life.” This is the first of seven “I am” statements that Jesus makes in John’s gospel, like “I am the Good Shepherd,” and “I am the light of the world.” But what does he mean by this one? In what sense is Jesus “the bread of life?” In most cultures, bread is a primary means of nourishment, so Jesus is claiming to be able to nourish people here. Later, the people struggle to understand exactly what he means by that, but it’s pretty clear that he is referring to some kind of spiritual nourishment that gives life.

There are also words of comfort here for us. Jesus says that his mission is to hold on to every single person that God has given to him until he raises them to new life on the last day or the day of judgment. Christians, especially Presbyterian Christians, have taken great comfort in this promise, which they call the “perseverance of the saints,” the idea that our salvation depends solely on what Jesus has done on our behalf, and he that won’t let go of us ever, in spite of our inevitable failures. This is wonderful news! Maybe it’s God’s word for you this morning!

Jesus also promises “eternal life” to those who believe. This will be developed more fully in John 10, but for now we can say that eternal life

isn't just about life after death. It's about a quality of life now, a life rooted in a relationship with the God who made and redeemed us. A life in which we sense we are doing what we were created to do. And, yes, a life that continues beyond the grave. Let's keep going.

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.

Jesus is teaching in a Jewish synagogue, and the religious leaders there aren't pleased with his claims. "He didn't come down from heaven," they say, "He grew up nearby. We know his mother and father!" Jesus doesn't really argue the point with them. He just points out that not everyone is going to believe in him- only those who are drawn by the Father. Again, Jesus is sounding an awful lot like a Presbyterian! Presbyterians have always insisted that because human sin has infected every part of us- body, mind, emotions, even the will- that it is God who must initiate a relationship with us. Jesus doesn't deny that human choice enters into the picture. He calls us to believe. But some people seem

unable or unwilling to respond to Jesus, and Jesus says that's because the Father hasn't drawn them to him.

Let's jump ahead to verse 51 where the really troubling words begin.

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. ⁵²*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* ⁵³*So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* ⁵⁴*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;* ⁵⁵*for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.* ⁵⁷*Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.* ⁵⁸*This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.*" ⁵⁹*He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. (John 5:51-59)*

Ouch! As hard as these words are for us, they were even more difficult for those who first heard them. Jesus not only claims that his flesh is the bread of life given for the world. He goes on to state that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they will not have life. It sounds almost

cannibalistic, doesn't it? And we also need to remember how absolutely horrific it would have sounded to good Jews to even think of drinking blood. The prohibition against drinking blood was at the heart of many Kosher laws then and still is today. This is very provocative language. So, what did Jesus mean by it?

Remember the discussions between Jesus and Nicodemus and Jesus and the woman at the well? In both cases, they misunderstood Jesus because they took his words too literally- Nicodemus regarding being "born again," and the woman regarding "living water." It's a pattern in John's gospel, and it's what the leaders in the synagogue are doing here, by taking his command to eat his body and drink his blood literally.

To understand what Jesus meant by these words we must go back to the meaning of Jesus' claim to be the "bread of life." He had shown them the sign of feeding them literal bread to nourish their bodies. But he is now saying that there is more to it than that. Two tracks. Jesus can also nourish our souls. Just as we feed on bread to nourish our bodies, so we spiritually "feed" on Jesus to nourish our souls. That can work out practically in two ways.

The first has to do with what Jesus said earlier about believing in him, entrusting our lives to him. We are nourished by him as we exercise faith to live as he instructs us to. It's something like he says in Matthew's

gospel, *“Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* (Matt. 11:28,29)

Jesus is inviting us to entrust our lives to him, to learn from him what it means to live life as God intended it to be lived. To be nourished in our spirits and find rest for our souls. We do that by exercising our faith as we risk, give, and pray as Jesus teaches us to do. As we do that, our souls are strengthened like a muscle that has been exercised.

The other possibility for understanding what Jesus meant is a sacramental one. There are clear echoes of the Lord’s Supper as Jesus offers his body and blood for our benefit. Many of you have found spiritual nourishment as you have celebrated the Lord’s Supper, so don’t neglect opportunities to do so.

Let’s move on to the conclusion of the passage. ⁶⁰*When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”* ⁶¹*But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?”* ⁶²*Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?* ⁶³*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* ⁶⁴*But among you there are some who do not believe.”* For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one

that would betray him.⁶⁵ And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:60-69)

The Jewish leaders were not the only ones who found this teaching to be hard and off-putting! His followers also struggled with it to the point that many left him! From a human point of view, this chapter seems like a major failure in Jesus' ministry. He started with 5000 enthusiastic followers who were ready to make him a king, but by the end of the chapter, there don't appear to be many more than the twelve! I'm guessing if he had a good PR person, they would have been apoplectic at this point! But Jesus uses different criteria to measure success. He was faithful in doing and proclaiming the will of the Father, and that's all that mattered to him. For Jesus, that was success.

We'll close with the words of Simon Peter. He often stuck his foot in his mouth, but he got it right this time. When Jesus asked the twelve if they wished to desert him along with all the others, Peter responded, "*Lord, to*

whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Good answer, Peter!

Jesus’ invitation to entrust your life to him with the promise of new life now and in the eternal future still stands. And eleven of those twelve were so convinced that Jesus was “the bread of life sent down from heaven,” that they faced death rather than deny that belief. And hundreds of millions of people since have also found him to be true to his word, including people in every country in the world, and many of you in this sanctuary this morning. Can you trust Jesus with your life? As Peter pointed out, who else are you going to trust?