

I Am the Bread of Life
Second in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by
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John 6:35-51

³⁵Jesus 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. ⁴⁰This 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.” ⁴¹Then the Religious Authorities 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. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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.”

During the pandemic there has been a lot of press about how many people started making bread. Earlier in this year-long shut down, the news was more about scarcity. Grocery store shelves were empty of flour and yeast. There were stories of people going online to buy flour and the limited choices left some with having to buy fifty-pound bags at a time. That's a lot of flour! One couple assumed such a quantity would last them all year but their order placed in April was gone by June. Then stories appeared about people nurturing and sharing their sourdough starter, about folks researching their great-grandmother's recipes and perfecting banana bread.

Now looking back over almost a year at how we have managed this long season of isolation, and as we prepare to emerge from it I have come across a number of thoughtful reflections about why people turned to bread baking and the various reasons it helped them cope. Mixing, kneading, waiting for dough to rise, all of it gives people a sense of control in the midst of a scary and uncertain time and with more time at home we've had more leisure to enjoy this fragrant, tactile pleasure. Delivering homemade bread to friends and neighbors is providing meaningful connections – a genuine living out of the word “companion” a word, which broken down, simply means “with bread.” Com-panion.

In an article entitled, “The Existential Comforts of Coaxing Yeast out of Air, Kneading, Proofing, Baking and Sharing,” Emily VanDerWerff writes: “Bread baking is a thing we do in a crisis, perhaps because bread is one of the very foundations of human civilization, and perhaps because it has been marketed to us as life-giving. In the midst of quarantine, we have turned, seemingly collectively, to techniques from the past. There is archaeological evidence of bread baking that goes back ten thousand years!” She quotes a food historian who says, “Bread is basically the root of everything from a culinary standpoint and from a life standpoint.”¹

¹ Emily VanDerWerff, “How to Bake Bread: The Existential Comforts of Coaxing Yeast out of Air, Kneading, Proofing, Baking and Sharing,” vox.com, May 19, 2020.

It is no wonder, then, that Jesus uses bread to describe himself and to tell us why God sent him from heaven. It was from the life standpoint that Jesus is speaking when he says, “I am the bread of life.” In the first of his “I AM” sayings in the Gospel of John, Jesus begins with that most basic of human needs: sustenance, food, a daily necessity, a thing essential for life itself. Yet, the bread Jesus is talking about is clearly not just the culinary kind, a source of energy to get us through the day. When Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life,” he means that he himself is what is truly essential – not only for the living of our days, but for our sense of wholeness, wellbeing, our hope. This is why at the center of the church’s life of faith sits a table – where the common is consecrated, and what is simple and sparse – a piece broken off a single loaf is pronounced *bountiful*. By faith, our little bites of communion bread promise nothing less than forgiveness, acceptance, wholeness, in a word – life.

By the time we arrive at Jesus making this gracious promise saying, “I am the Bread of Life,” he has amassed quite a following. At the opening of this chapter he fed five thousand people from five little loaves of barley bread. Then, to further demonstrate his power and authority he walks on water. The crowds increase around him – begging for more signs and wonders – and he tries to escape with his disciples until they all catch up with him – both the curious seekers as well as the religious authorities hot on his trail. Jesus knows, and the gospel writer helps the readers begin to see that – those crowds are looking to Jesus for more than another free meal.

That is why Jesus keeps returning, refrain-like, to talking about raising people up on the last day. His talk of bread that will last is pointing toward a more distant, but very real, horizon of the New Creation. Jesus is saying: if you want to have a hope-filled future, you need to eat the food that God gives. It is more than what can be consumed in a day. Rather, it is the invitation to believe that what Jesus does – signifies who Jesus is. The One who feeds 5,000 hungry people is the One who is sent down from heaven by God to fill us with

the hope of resurrection. In this saddest of weeks, when in our country alone we have lost over five hundred thousand people to a pandemic virus, it is a blessed gift today to hear again these life-giving, hope-inspiring words, “I am the Bread of Life.”

Blaise Pascal was a 17th Century mathematician credited with advancing all manner of understanding things in the natural and physical world, but it was a theological observation that resonates with us now. Pascal said: “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of each person which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known to us in Jesus Christ.” That God-shaped hole – in the human heart is what the Bread of Life can fill. If you ever wonder if your believing in Jesus is sufficient to fill up that God-shaped hole inside of you, just remember Jesus also gives us the faith that we need and our seeking itself is part of that gift.

The Bread of Life cannot be gained or earned, coerced or accomplished. So if you find yourself hungering for more, then the hunger itself is a sign you have already had a taste. Remember also that this passage shows us that Jesus truly is what Jesus does. He reveals how he satisfies the hungry heart only after he has given the crowds food for the day. So we too find our faith in feeding others, in serving in Jesus name, and we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. As Duke Divinity School theologian, Norman Wirzba writes, “The bread that Jesus is.... is food for the healing, transformation and fulfillment of life, rather than its mere continuation.”²

Sara Miles was a self-described atheist who had dismissed any desire to have faith, because she said, “I thought being a Christian was all about belief. I didn’t know any Christians, but I considered them people who believed in the virgin birth, for example, the way I believed in photosynthesis or germs.” Then, with the curiosity of a journalist she

² Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, p. 155, quoted in Matthew Rich, *Trying to Say What Is True*, p.47.

wandered into an urban church in San Francisco, and someone handed her a chunk of bread, and she knew it was made out of flour and water and yeast, but she also knew in a way she cannot fully explain that God was in that bread,” she says: that Jesus was alive and in her mouth.

Faith, she began to realize was not abstract at all, but material and physical. With her eyes open to the needs of the homeless and poor in San Francisco she went to the Rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church and founded a food pantry. In one of her books about her unexpected conversion and her growing passion for feeding the poor, she writes: “In church on Sundays, and at the food pantry on Fridays, I found myself overwhelmed with the implications of the incarnation – the inescapable physicality and humanity of a God who should have known better than to dwell in the muck with us... I’d thought Christianity meant angels and trinities and being good. Instead I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome... I came to believe that God is revealed not only in bread during church services, but wherever we share food with others, particularly strangers. I learned that hunger can lead to more life – that by sharing real food, I’d find communion with the most unlikely people; that by eating a piece of bread, I’d experience myself as part of one body. By opening ourselves to others, even strangers, we will taste God.”³

I think we know, in ways we cannot fully explain, what Jesus means when he says, “I AM the Bread of Life.” I think we understand in a very profound way why people are baking bread and sharing it with others during this long pandemic. I think we also believe the crowd around Jesus includes us when we hear the invitation at the communion table: *O taste and see that the Lord is good.*

AMEN.

³ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: feeding, healing and raising the dead*, p. xvii and npr.org, *All Things Considered*, 5/5/08.