

THE BREAD OF LIFE
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Text: John 6:24-35

Jesus teaches about the bread of heaven, food for eternal life.

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."

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." I read a story this week about a widower who had some raspberry bushes, and it made me think about those words in a deeper way.

The first summer after his wife died, a woman from his church asked if she could come over and pick raspberries. She knew he and his wife had grown the bushes from the spindly little canes that came from the mail-order catalogue into thick, healthy shrubs loaded with fruit. Raspberries have to be picked if you

want them to keep producing," she explained. "And you need a lot of them if you want to make a pie."

She came and picked the berries in the morning and returned in the afternoon with the most delicious looking pie he'd ever laid eyes on: homemade crust, bright red filling peeking through the golden brown lattice crisscrossing the top, and still warm from the oven. "I can't eat all that by myself," he said. "Would you like to stay and have some with me?"

He poured them each a glass of milk and cut two pieces of pie, and it was as good as it looked: the perfect balance of

sweet and tart; flaky, buttery crust, with a little salt sprinkled on top. It was the best pie he ever tasted, and he thanked her for making it. He also thanked her for staying around and helping him eat it. “Pie always tastes better with company,” she said, and that gave him an idea.

After she left, he packed up the pie and went to visit a friend. He rang the bell, and when the door opened, he said, “Here, I brought you some pie.” The friend invited him in, and they each had a piece while they sat in the kitchen and chatted.

On the way home he started thinking about who else could use, not just some pie, but some berries and sugar, some flour and salt, mixed together and baked into an edible manifestation of loving care and kindness. Several people came to mind—other friends who had recently suffered losses like his—and he spent the rest of the afternoon going around and visiting them. He didn’t stay long at each of their homes—just long enough to ask how they were doing and share a little sliver of friendship.

He came to think of it as communion by pie. Not that the pie by itself created that sense of connection. But it was the vehicle for the feeling that was exchanged during those visits. It was the means by which compassion flowed from one human being to another.

Now, I have a huge sweet tooth, so I may be biased when I say this, but I think most people would go for a good homemade pie over a loaf of bread any day. It’s not even a contest. But the thing about bread is, it’s more than just a sweet indulgence. It’s a staple. It’s something that sustains us every day. It’s always there on the table, next to the butter. Bread is the staff of life, my grandfather used to say, and for him a meal was not a meal without it. And he

certainly wasn’t the only one who ever felt that way.

There’s something elemental about bread. It’s such a simple thing. It only has a few ingredients: flour, yeast, salt, water, and maybe an egg white glaze on the crust if you really want to get fancy. But for such a simple thing, it’s so hearty, and it provides so much sustenance. If you had to pick one food to keep you going, bread would be a pretty good choice. That’s why jars of grain have been found in the tombs of Egyptian Pharaohs—so they could have bread to eat in the afterlife. That’s why European immigrants coming to America would sew seeds into the lining of their clothes—so they could have bread to eat in the New World.

I think that’s also why, in the gospel reading last week, bread was one of the two foods Jesus fed the multitudes with in the wilderness. It was the end of a long day, people were tired and hungry, and there was nothing around for them to eat. So Jesus gave them bread to really fill up their stomachs. And it did. People ate until they were stuffed, and they couldn’t eat anymore. We know that because John mentions that there were leftovers—enough to fill twelve baskets.

But even bread only lasts for so long. Eventually people get hungry again. And that’s where we pick up in the gospel reading this week.

After he finishes feeding the five thousand, that evening Jesus slips away and heads back to Capernaum with the disciples. And when people realize he’s gone, they go after him. And when they catch up with him, they’re like, Why did you disappear? Why did you leave us? They thought he was going to be their meal ticket, they thought he was going to provide them with an endless supply of bread, and they were upset that he abandoned them. I would be, too, if I was in their shoes.

But for Jesus, there was a deeper purpose to what he did. Yes, he was satisfying their physical hunger. But more than that, he was satisfying their spiritual hunger. For him, the bread was a sign pointing them to God's goodness and mercy and making God's love for them real.

It was just like the pie the man shared with his friends, who weren't necessarily hungry for dessert, but they were hungry for something more. They were hungry for someone to care about them. They were hungry for someone to listen to them. They were hungry for someone to understand what they were going through.

Not that a piece of pie or a loaf of bread by itself could create that sense of connection. But they were the vehicles for the feelings that were exchanged, whether at someone's kitchen table or out in the wilderness. They were the means by which compassion flowed, whether it was one person's compassion for another or God's compassion for a whole crowd of people.

So when Jesus says he's the bread of life, I think he's saying all that about himself. I think he's saying he's the connection between us and God; he's the way God's love becomes real for us—the way God's love becomes something that's not abstract and distant; something we can actually feel; something that nourishes us, body and soul; something that fills us with life. And his promise is that he'll always be there. His grace will never run out. When we come to him, and when we believe in him, he'll always provide what we need. Amen.