

Bread
Sermon for August 11, 2024
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A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine who is a cradle Episcopalian and lifelong church musician, posted on Facebook: “Breadapalooza, here we go.” At the time I had no idea what he was talking about. Several people expressed their confusion, and he clarified his comment by explaining that there were multiple “bread gospels” coming up. Indeed, for 5 weeks starting at the end of July and all of August, every Sunday Gospel reading is from John Chapter 6, which all talk about bread. Apparently I wasn’t the only one who was confused by the post, and a lengthy discussion thread followed. Many of my friend’s friends are clergy or church musicians, and made jokes about the “high-carb season” and “carbagesimas”. Other people mentioned that they were going to include “bread hymns” in their services. And we just sang Hymn #301, which is the one I like best.

This might seem like a strange theme, to preach about bread. But bread in the Bible—and in fact the whole history of western civilization—is enormously important. Our English words for company and companion come from the Latin words *cum panis*.

Between the books of Genesis and Revelation, there are at least 492 references to bread! In the ancient middle east, bread was the basic food that provided nourishment. Bread was made in every home, every day. It was usually a pretty uncomplicated recipe: wheat or barley flour was combined with water and salt and baked in simple ovens. The leavening came from yeast that occurred naturally in

the flour and in the environment. Often the words for “bread” and “food” are used interchangeably.

In one of the earliest scriptures, the book of Leviticus defines the complicated system of sacrifices to God. This included many different types of offerings including meat offerings, burnt offerings, and cereal offerings. The cereal offerings were of course grains, and mostly bread. In the tabernacle and later in the Temple, a ritual type of loaf called “show bread” or “bread of the presence” was placed on the altar every week; only the priests of the temple were allowed to eat this special type of bread.

When the Hebrews in Egypt were told by God to leave quickly, they were admonished not to wait for the bread to rise, but to combine the ingredients and bake it immediately. It was from this that the feast of unleavened bread or Passover developed. During the 40 years when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, when they were hungry, God provided manna from heaven, another type of bread. As is everything in the Old Testament, when food is available, it is because God has provided it.

Breaking bread together meant forming an sacred family bond, not just with one another, but also with God. The ancient prophets used the “bread of life” as a metaphor to mean the word, the wisdom, everything that comes from God. In Proverbs, it is stated: “Come, eat of my bread; drink of the wine I have mixed.” The book of Ecclesiasticus tells us what Wisdom will do for the one who fears God: “She will feed him with the bread of understanding, and give him the water of wisdom to drink.”

Jesus understood the importance of bread in the Scriptures and in people's lives. The Gospels of both Matthew and Luke tell us that he quoted from Deuteronomy when he said, "one does not live by bread alone."

But in addition to all the biblical references, the Christian liturgical calendar recognizes another important celebration of bread, which is also timely. This is the holiday known as Lammas, which is observed around the first of August, the half-way point between the Summer solstice and the Fall equinox. The name Lammas comes from the old English word for "loaf mass." As was the case so often with the early Christians, this holiday was derived from the Celtic pagan harvest festival Lúnasa (Lughnasadh). This quasi-pagan/quasi-religious holiday is observed in various parts of Scotland, Wales, England, and Ireland. As part of this celebration, people bake bread made from wheat of the first harvest of the season and then take their loaves to church to be blessed. In fact, last Sunday St. Paul's church in Bantam held a traditional Lammas celebration, with a procession around the church and blessing of the bread, which was placed on the altar. I know this because a friend of mine, who is a parishioner of St. Paul's, baked the loaf of sourdough bread for the occasion. .

In our Gospel reading a couple of weeks ago, Jesus took 5 loaves of barley bread and 2 fish and fed a crowd of 5,000 people who had come to hear him preach. He told the crowd that it wasn't Moses who gave them manna from heaven, but it is "bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

But in today's Gospel, he goes even further. He tells the crowd that HE is the bread of life, and that whoever believes in him will not be hungry or thirsty. He said, "I am the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." He is saying that salvation of all people depends on

God's providing him as a sacrifice, the same way sacrifices were defined in Leviticus.

This is pretty heady stuff! This was confusing and upsetting to the people. Some of them who heard Jesus mocked or ridiculed him for making such an outlandish claim. But Jesus dismissed their complaints and continued to elaborate on his assertion. Unfortunately, his explanation did not satisfy a lot of the skeptics, which led to bigger problems.

I don't know about you, but I'm confused too. What did Jesus mean? How exactly are we to understand that Jesus is the Bread of Life?

Jesus extends the metaphor that begins with bread being equal to food, which we eat when we are hungry and which nourishes us. He continues it beyond the physical to the spiritual. God has sent him as the living being who will nourish and feed the spiritual hunger of the people. Just as we make bread from wheat to fill our bellies, God made bread from flesh to fill our souls. But unlike consuming actual bread made from grain, consuming his own flesh will give people the reward of eternal life. Eternal life is the opposite of eternal condemnation and includes the promise of life free from death.

This is the language of sacrifice—the gift of one's flesh is the greatest and most personal of all sacrifices. In this instance, Jesus makes his sacrifice in behalf of the world.

Even the writer and theologian C. S. Lewis found these claims to be troubling. In his book *The Case for Christianity*, he writes:

“A man who was merely a man
and said the sort of things Jesus said
wouldn’t be a great moral teacher.
He’d either be a lunatic—
on the level with a man who says he’s a poached egg—
or else he’d be the Devil of Hell.
You must make your choice.
Either this man was, and is, the Son of God,
or else a madman or something worse”

My own way of coming to terms with all of this is not to try understand it in a rational way, but to accept it as a metaphor, a parable, an allegory, which I believe is the way that Jesus wanted us to understand it. I also don’t believe there is a right or a wrong way to understand these puzzling words. Each of us will figure it out on our own terms. Even if that just means thinking about it the next time we eat a piece of bread. Some of us will do later this morning at coffee hour; maybe some of you will go out to breakfast and do the same. When we eat our bread, or croissant, or even pizza, we can think about Jesus and reflect on the words of the Eucharistic Prayer: “Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the bread.”

May we all be nourished and empowered by this gift of bread, this Bread of Life. May we rise up and live out the unconditional love God bakes within us through our relationship in Jesus Christ. For in Jesus Christ, God has proclaimed a feast of the heart, and given us the Bread of Life to nourish and sustain us in all our relationships, at all times and in all places, in this world and the next. Amen.