

Bread Matters August 6, 2006
John 6: 24-35
Binkley Memorial Baptist Church
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“You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

The hungry crowd of over 5000 people whom Jesus fed with five loaves and two fishes has crossed the lake to find Jesus. Perhaps he will perform this miracle and feed them again. Finding him, they are surprised by his greeting, informing them that they are looking for him for all the wrong reasons. He is not the divine baker, who will produce bread on demand. He has shown them how to feed each other, and in so doing, has given them a *sign*, a reminder if you will, of life as it is intended by the Creator. It is not that bread is unimportant—bread matters. Without it we perish. And in feeding the crowd, Jesus, in compassion, makes a way out of what looked like no way in order to feed the hungry. He takes what is offered, he blesses it, he breaks it and gives it. And all are filled—there is more than enough!

In an acted sign, Jesus shows how the true bread of heaven—the bread of God—is that which gives life to the world. If the crowd had understood the sign, they would not be asking for bread to eat, they would already know how to access that bread—by offering and receiving, giving thanks, breaking it and sharing it. Instead, they would be clamoring after Jesus seeking to be of the same mind, to live out of a new reality, to offer *their* lives for the life of the world.

When Jesus challenges them “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,” they appear interested in learning how they can do the works of God. But after hearing that it is in believing in the one that has been sent by God, they want more proof, more miracles from Jesus. After all, even Moses fed their hungry ancestors in the wilderness with the manna. Jesus corrects their misperception: it was not Moses, but God who provided the manna. Likewise, it is the *One who has sent Jesus* who has provided the food shared by the 5000, and has also provided for them in the *One sent*—“I am the bread of life,” Jesus tells them.

Mother Teresa in caring for the dying poor in Calcutta, noted that hunger for bread is related to other basic hungers. “We give dying people bread because they hunger and perish not just for bread but also for love. When we hand them bread, we are also giving them love.” (Willimon, *Sunday Supper*, p. 65) This morning we gather at this to receive bread, to receive love. Bread, wine, flesh, blood—these bespeak matter, the physical stuff of life. We are created as flesh and blood and that is good, says the Creator. But that is not all that matters.

Jesus, in the feeding of the crowd found a way to tell us that life is about bread, and also more than bread. Has shown us an alternative view of the world, and in so doing pointed out what is the *matter* with the dominant reality lived in the world. Instead of working for food that endures for eternity, much of our human living negates the future—it is work for the food that perishes. When we believe that now is all we’ve got (or act like it anyway), we feverishly attempt to make the most of it. That for which we are giving our lives is not nourishing us but destroying us—stuffing ourselves with food and things results in obesities of body and possessions; using food and other gifts of God as weapons or threats creates violence and oppression; consuming at alarming rates the resources that sustain our planet devastates our earthly home; and hoarding from fear and selfishness deepens the disparity between rich and poor.

This table at which we find nourishment to work for food that endures reenacts another sign. When Jesus gathered at table with disciples on the eve of his death, they shared the Passover/Seder meal—the remembrance of God’s saving acts in releasing Israel from bondage and in continually providing for the people’s needs. Bread and wine were and are today part of this meal. Surely on that eve Jesus sensed the fear, the anxiety of the disciples. And perhaps even he was anxious about whether the work he had begun would continue. Would they remember the new reality or would they scatter and forget? Would they despair when persecuted or uncertain? How would they remember that they are not alone—that they are not their own? In a stroke of brilliance he takes the two most basic elements of the Seder meal and infuses them with new meaning. The bread, it is my body. The wine, it is my blood. Whenever you eat or drink, remember that I am present with you. Not just in the Seder

meal, but every time your stomachs growl with hunger, every time you break bread with family, friend, or stranger.

Will Willimon reminds us that “when Jesus came proclaiming the advent of his kingdom, he did not begin with sermons about reconciliation, atonement, justification, redemption or an other big, abstract, hi-sounding words. He began by pointed to our stomach, to that gnawing, unsatisfied, emptiness within. And then he invited us to dinner...Having fed us, he charged us to feed others...He points us to the hungry, saying, ‘give them something to eat’...And wonder of wonders, when we dare to do what he says, like the boy with the five loaves and two fish, it is enough.” (p. 72)

This meal that we share is not, nor was it ever meant to be a memorial service about Jesus’ death. This is a *joyful life-giving feast* where we are invited to take into our lives, our stomachs, our hearts the living presence of one who was concerned that the way of life he was sent to proclaim be remembered and more importantly, enacted. Like all of worship, eating at this table gives us a chance to acknowledge God’s way, and also practice God’s way before we go out into the world. Here we can practice vulnerability, turning to a neighbor to offer peace, sharing our concerns, asking for Spirit’s presence, hearing a word that may change us, releasing tears, clapping hands in joy, raising arms in praise, or singing joyously on or off key. And at this table we learn how to give and receive, how to show gratitude and be satisfied with the goodness of God’s gifts.

Which brings me to some practical matters of bread, such as who can eat and how we eat. Over the centuries the church has spend untold hours in determining *who* can eat, at what age, at what stage of faith—only believers, only baptized believers, only baptized believers who are members of this church, this denomination. While perhaps not the intent of those doing the determining, it looks for all the world like hoarding, doesn’t it? A private cult develops, some are in and some are out, and we have placed ourselves right back into the very box that Jesus came to break open! All of us need to be fed—all of us hunger and thirst. There is enough of Christ for all! What would this meal look like if the main requirement, maybe the only requirement, for being invited to eat with Jesus is simply that one be hungry? (Willimon, p. 69)

The church has also spent countless hours deciding *how* we should eat. How *is* important—it matters, because this is a sign after all—it reflects what we believe about what we are doing. Our human rituals are meant to make sense of, and place us in readiness for an experience of the holy. They provide us a chance to “catch a glimpse of the almost unbearable preciousness and mystery of life.” (Buechner) What better place to practice giving/sharing bread than at this table? How best to know the gift of receiving as we open our hands to the one offering us bread? This is especially true for those of us who find it more comfortable to feed rather than be fed, for if we can’t be fed by our sisters and brothers here—whether friend or stranger—how will we be able to meet and feed those we encounter when we leave this place?

This morning, we receive the gifts of this table from our deacons. When they offer you the bread and the cup, look them in the eye as you hear their words: “the bread of life for you” “the bread of heaven for you”, “the cup of salvation for you”, “the cup of blessing for you.” Acknowledge this gift with a simple “amen” or “so be it” or “thanks be to God”.

As we eat this bread and drink this cup, may we find our appetites changing. May our thirst for ease and comfort become a thirst for righteousness and justice. May our hunger for possessions and success grow into a hunger for sharing with the dispossessed. May our hankering after pleasure and escape, quick fixes and easy answers be transformed into an insatiable desire for the Bread of Life, the Word that gives life, now and forever.