

## “Lord, Give Us This Bread Always”

John 6:24-35

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This passage from John’s Gospel comes on the heels of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. That was our text a week ago Sunday. As the story continues, Jesus has left the crowd and traveled to the other side of the sea. He is alone there until the crowd picks up his trail and catches up with him. They think they have tasted what he has to offer and they want more. But as they approach him, Jesus is overwhelmed by a feeling of dread. It dawns on him that the crowd has missed the whole point of the miraculous feeding on the previous day.

They had been hungry, literally hungry, and Jesus had fed them on the bread and the fish. Now, it’s a day later, and they are hungry again. They seek him out as if he were the one with the lunch ticket. But it is not the hungering of the stomach he has come to satisfy. It is the hungering of the soul. He had fed the hunger of the five thousand the day before, but he had hoped that that compassionate gesture would be understood as a clear sign that he is the Messiah, the one who had come to address the yearning of the soul for rest, the yearning of the soul for peace, the yearning of the soul for the kind of love that is not conditional, but the kind of love that is un-conditional. Jesus understood himself to be the Bread of Life, but in the minds of those in the crowd he is only a lunch ticket! He had hoped they would connect the dots and see him for who he is, but they have fallen short of his expectation.

As the crowd re-assembles around him, he will try a second time to let them know who he is. Instead of providing sandwiches and chips, he says to the crowd, “I am the Bread of Life; the one who comes to me shall not hunger, and the one who believes in me shall not thirst.” I can picture many in the crowd scratching their heads, rolling their eye balls, wondering what that means, still hoping he’ll come through with a box lunch for everyone. After all, he did it yesterday, and besides, they’ve come a long distance for a free lunch!

“I am the Bread of Life,” he says again. He repeats it a third time, “I am the Bread of Life,” as if repetition will move the message from the mundane to the sublime, from the transient to the eternal. He begins to talk with this crowd about other kinds of hunger. And pretty soon, he is speaking their language.

There is a gay man in the crowd who has never before heard that he is loved regardless of the rejection he experiences every day. Here he is meeting a person who is speaking his language, addressing his hunger.

There is a young woman in the crowd who has never before heard that she is a good person in spite of the fact that she is pregnant and not married. Here she is meeting a person who is speaking her language, addressing her hunger, loving her when everybody else has labeled her.

There is an elderly man in the crowd whose family lives far away, who lives alone, who often soils himself, and who is terrified to walk down to the market where his friends often meet for coffee and for talk, because he is afraid of their teasing, afraid he’ll lose his welcome. Here he is meeting a person who seems to understand this unspoken hunger, this hunger for someone who will care for him and not be put off by his intestinal dysfunction, someone who will love him for the person he has become.

There is a teenage girl in the crowd who feels she has no freedom, no freedom to be herself, no freedom to explore her world, no freedom to learn by making her own mistakes. She is feeling trapped by her culture's double standard. But here she is meeting a person who just might understand this hunger. Who cares about a sandwich and a bag of barbecue chips when it's the other hunger, the hunger for freedom, that's holding her back from the fullness of life.

"I am the Bread of Life;" he says it again. "The one who comes to me shall not hunger; the one who believes in me shall not thirst." By now, some in the crowd have turned away and left. They are headed for the shops and the market stalls where they can buy some lunch. They have figured it out. There will be no free lunch today. But the irony is there will be a free lunch today; for the hunger Jesus came to satisfy is resolved without cost, without a dollar bill or a checkbook or a credit card. The bread he offers is without price. Those on the way to the lunch counters may reach this understanding on another day.

But others in the crowd are holding their ground as if glued to their seats. They are spellbound. Their hunger for love; their hunger for acceptance; their hunger for God is met in this person. The bread he gives them on this second day is the invitation to believe. Perhaps no one has ever offered them such an invitation. He invites them to believe in God.

He invites the gay man to believe God has made him just as he is, with a sexual orientation that is not like the majority of his neighbors, but an orientation of God's own devising. He invites the single woman who is with child to believe that God will be her midwife, tending to her every need, not abandoning her but present to cut the umbilical cord and to bathe the infant and to place the child at the mother's breast.

He invites the elderly man to believe in a God who understands the indignities of aging, who understands the terror of friends falling away, who understands what it means to lose control of the bladder. He invites the teenager to believe in God who wrestles all the time with freedom, for whom freedom is a blessing and a nightmare at the same time. Jesus invites the crowd to believe. And with some, this invitation strikes a chord. With some, it is the bread that will satisfy the hunger they have endured long enough.

“I am the Bread of Life,” he says. “I am the Bread of Life.” I picture him leaning down and taking a loaf of bread out of his tote bag. He holds it up for them to see. “I am the Bread of Life,” he repeats. “I am the Bread of Life.” He makes no move to break the bread or to share the bread. He offers it instead as a sign. And many in the crowd nod an affirming nod as if to signal they ‘get it.’ They have understood. He is the one for whom they have been waiting. He is the Anointed One, the Christ. He is the Bread of Life.

I suppose preaching can be defined in a thousand ways. Surely, if each of us here were to write down a definition for preaching, we would have as many definitions as we have people. One way to understand preaching is to think of it as a style for passing out invitations. Instead of getting the invitation in the mail or on the internet, one comes to church to receive the invitation in person. It is an invitation to believe, to believe in God, to believe in a God whose love has no expiration date. Yogurt and ground beef and 2% milk all have expiration dates. Their goodness runs out! The goodness of God has no such limitation. It is eternal. It is without condition, without price. The text for today from John’s Gospel gives this preacher an imperative to invite the congregation to believe. For it is in believing that one comes to know the truth, and it is in knowing the truth that we are all set free. In the greatest of hope, Amen!

