

9 August 2015 (11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
**“Our Common Life”**  
John 6:35, 41-51

If you have ever had the experience of going too long without eating, you know the instant change that takes place when you do eat. Something as simple as bread can move you from despair to hope. Several years ago I reported for my annual Navy physical on an empty stomach because I had to have blood drawn at the lab, and I couldn't have anything but water after midnight. That was no big deal, except there was a long line when I got to the lab. After waiting for more than an hour, and by that time having been up for almost four hours, I was not only feeling hungry, I was starting to feel shaky and strange, out of control emotionally. A friend of mine was there at the same time for his annual physical, and when he said hello and sat down beside me, I inexplicably began to cry. I was feeling a kind of despair, only I wasn't sad. Obviously my friend was concerned and asked me what was the matter, but I didn't know what to say because I was having trouble talking. Just then the corpsman called my name and I had my blood drawn, but as soon as I got out of there, I went and got a sandwich. I took two bites of that sandwich and immediately felt different. Like that, I could think clearly. In an instant, I moved from despair to hope. From two bites of bread, I felt my whole outlook on life change.

I've never had, before or since, an experience quite that dramatic with food, where I've actually felt myself change from having two bites of bread, but every time I read this passage from John's Gospel in which Jesus presents himself as the bread of life, I think back to that day. It is tempting with a passage such as this to spiritualize it to the point that we aren't even thinking about actual bread and its effect on us. After all, it is a little difficult to think of a person as bread, as food that we actually eat, unless we are thinking of cannibalism. And we do know that the early Christians were sometimes accused of practicing cannibalistic rites when people heard them speak of eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ. “But,” we say, “of course Jesus was speaking metaphorically. He wasn't inviting the crowd to dismember him, he was referring to his death as the ultimate sacrifice that would offer eternal life to everyone who believed in him.” Certainly that is true, and that is what we find in the passage we have heard today. But why bread? Why did Jesus use so simple and tangible a metaphor as bread to refer to himself?

It is clear that, on one level, Jesus has in mind manna in the wilderness, the strange bread that God rained down from heaven each morning when the Israelites were starving, after they had accused Moses of plotting their demise by leading them out of Egypt. The passage we heard last week from Exodus 16 describes the circumstances of God's providence. Jesus' teaching in John Chapter 6 refers to the tradition rooted in that experience of God's people, a tradition that understood “manna from heaven” as the full range of God's physical and spiritual provision for His people, including their deliverance from oppression. Immediately after he feeds the five thousand in the wilderness, when Jesus cites that tradition as the basis for understanding who he is and

why he has come, he is citing perhaps the most significant experience any Jew could think of: the exodus from Egypt and the very formation of the people of God. Jesus could not have chosen anything of greater magnitude as the basis of comparison for his ministry than the Israelites' receiving manna from heaven. But here he is, an itinerant rabbi, the young man from Nazareth whose parents everyone knows, placing himself in the same league as Moses—what is he thinking? No wonder his audience begins to complain, in terms reminiscent of the Israelites' complaints in the wilderness many generations before.

But Jesus is insistent. He tells them to stop complaining. And he says it again, this time even more explicitly. "I am the bread of life." "I 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." We cannot hear these words, captured with such intensity by John, without being struck with Jesus' determination in the face of opposition. It is as though he has no other metaphor than this to convey who he is and why he has come: if not the bread of life, if not bread from heaven, there is no other way to understand him.

And so, on the level of religious tradition, Jesus' self-description as bread tells us that he identified himself with God's enduring provision for and deliverance of and formation of the people of God. But there is another level on which we can grasp the significance of bread as God's life-giving provision and deliverance. What is it that feeds your soul, your life? What is it that gives you hope, that delivers you from despair? What is it that fuels this community? What offers the church life, and love, and strength for the journey? Understanding Jesus as our bread, both individually and as a community, is vital for our common life. And perhaps the best way to grasp that dimension of Jesus' teaching is to consider how our life's relationships give us life, and how sometimes they bring only spiritual death and despair.

When I was in high school, I remember being invited to a party where anyone who was anyone was going to be there. Frankly, I was shocked that I was invited. It was sort of my life's ambition, at that point, to be accepted by anyone who was anyone. And I couldn't wait. But I was nervous. I wanted to look my best, to be my best. I wanted to be witty and cool and fun. And when the day came for the party, I was geared up to have the best time. It was going to be great, I just knew it. But then I got there, and I realized about an hour into the party that I was miserable. It was not great. I was not having the time of my life because I wasn't able to be myself. At that stage of my life, I wasn't real sure what that was, but I also knew that that setting was not it. What did I want? I was chagrined at the thought that I really just wanted to be at home with my parents, or maybe spending the night at a friend's house watching television. At what I had hoped would be the party to end all parties, I found that I wasn't with people who gave me life. I felt surrounded by people who were judging me. What young person has not found himself or herself in such a setting, awkward and lonely, inadequate and lost? It happens to all of us, and not just when we're young. To feel like an alien in a place where no one speaks your language and you are starving and thirsty—that is the very definition of spiritual longing. The picture of Elijah in the wilderness, spiritually and physically starved,

running from Jezebel, convinced that he was a failure, ready and willing to die—that is the point at which bread, both tangible and spiritual, begins to make sense. Who of us is unfamiliar with at least one relationship that has threatened to suck the life out of us, to drain us dry, and to make us feel as though we were dying? No wonder Jesus chose “bread of life” as the way to picture himself and his ministry. What better way to represent God’s desire to raise people from death to life?

Our common life as a church is grounded in bread, in Jesus as the bread of life. Without that basic, formative understanding of what gives us our identity and our sustenance, we are just another club or civic organization whose members gather for personal benefit or for the fulfillment of self-interest. But because of who Jesus was and is, and because he gave himself as bread for the world, we also are called to live qualitatively different lives than what our natural instincts would advise. In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he offers specific guidance as to what their life together should look like. He calls them to a higher standard than what they might normally have followed. As one who in his former life had been zealous to persecute those whom he didn’t feel were towing the line, or living the right kind of life, the new Paul advises the Ephesians to be tenderhearted and forgiving, as Christ had forgiven them, to imitate God, to live in love, and in general to look like Christ. In our common life together, how do we measure up to that standard? How are we doing in offering sustenance and grace, mercy and forgiveness, to those who feel shaky and starved, uncertain and scared, in this toxic world? The bread of life that Jesus offers the world begins in our life together. We, collectively, model the life-giving formula that bread alone can give to people who may only have known relationships that have drained them of life and encouragement, of sustenance and providence. If we see ourselves as the body of Christ in the world, then we must see ourselves as bread to each other and bread to the world.

I think back to my experience of feeling food-deprived in that Navy clinic, waiting to have blood drawn, and not understanding how or why I felt the way I did. As the church, the body of Jesus Christ, we live in the midst of people who are starving the way the Israelites were starving in the wilderness, the way Elijah felt despair and hopelessness as he ran from Jezebel. And what will we do? How will we respond? Who are we? Who do we understand ourselves to be in this troubled and confused world, amid people who do not understand why they feel as they do, only that they are weary and in pain? We begin with each other. We begin by offering to each other the bread that Christ has given to us. What gives you life? What nurtures your soul? When we are Christ to each other, we then discover our common life, bread that offers the difference between despair and hope.



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