

“The Bread of Life”
John 6:25-35

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If you are thinking about taking a nap during the sermon this morning, I would highly recommend that you reconsider. Normally, I don't really care. After all, for many of us Sunday morning is one of the few times during the week that we actually get to sit down for an hour of peace and quiet without cell phones or t.v. or jobs or family or volunteer activities or housework or yard work to distract us. So, when I look out from the pulpit and see people with their eyes closed I just assume you are enjoying the peace and quiet and relative calm of the morning. Once the snoring starts, I assume you are tired and need a little rest. When I was first learning about Centering Prayer, a form of Christian meditation, the teacher said that if we fall asleep during the twenty minutes we've assigned to prayer, we probably need to sleep – God understands. The scripture this morning, however, is fascinating and worthy of staying alert. Jesus has so much to say to us.

Chapter six in the Gospel of John is the story of Jesus as the Bread of Life. It begins with the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000 and the story of Jesus walking on water. Our portion of the text is a dialogue between the people and Jesus after these two events have taken place. In the Hebrew tradition, this type of dialogue is known as a Midrash – or an explanation of the text.

In the text, the people have found Jesus after he has gone to the other side of the sea. They are hungry and they want more bread. Jesus tells them that they have misunderstood the meaning of eating the bread he has given them. They are thinking about filling their stomachs while Jesus wants them to understand that true bread comes from heaven and feeds much more than a rumbling tummy. The true bread is the bread of eternal life. The people say they are eager to learn more about this bread. Jesus tells them that the bread that God gives comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Having forgotten about the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, they demand a sign as a way of understanding the bread of eternal life. Then Jesus says: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This dialogue is an experience of misunderstanding. The people are thinking about *bread* in lower case letters and Jesus is talking about *BREAD* in upper case letters. Jesus hopes the people will shift their understanding from the factual understanding of *bread* to the understanding of *BREAD* as a metaphor for God's love in the world. This is confusing for the people and they continue to misunderstand Jesus.

Many years ago when I was in seminary and Bob was in law school we visited Bob's parents at their home outside New York. The musical *CATS* had recently been produced and they gave us tickets to attend the show. I loved *CATS*. As many of you know the musical is based on a T.S. Elliot poem and filled with biblical imagery. It is about redemption and new life – there is even a character named Old Deuteronomy. As an overly serious divinity school student, the content of the plot was right up my alley.

The next morning while we were having breakfast, my mother-in-law asked us how we enjoyed the musical. She had recently seen it and hadn't really liked it. Bob said how much we liked it and how it was filled with biblical imagery and about redemption and new life. My mother-in-law said: "No it is not, it's about cats."

This kind of misunderstanding is exactly what happens in our text this morning. The people are thinking about *bread* while Jesus wants them to understand the true *BREAD* – the Bread of Life. This bread is the avenue to understanding God's truth. Jesus wants the people to see that nourishment of his bread is really the nourishment of his WAY of being. When we eat the bread he offers we take on his Way of Love and that Love shows us the face of God and the promise of eternal life. In his dialogue with the people, he is trying to show that the way of the world doesn't work; it is only God's way that works. It is only God's way that offers eternal life. To follow Jesus – to eat the bread he offers – means leaving the ways of the world behind and taking on the way of love.

A few weeks ago I read the recently published autobiography by Doug Anderson titled *Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, the Sixties, and a Journey of Self-Discovery*. Some of you might know Doug. He is a teacher at the UCONN Hartford Campus and attends lectio divina on Monday morning. Doug was a medic in Vietnam. In his book, he writes with vivid detail about the evil of war and how anger, hate and mistrust results in death and destruction. His experiences were life altering and difficult to overcome. He says he was a mental mess when he came home. Many years after the war, he discovered that he suffered from posttraumatic stress syndrome. When he first came home from the war, however, he did not have a way of coping with his terrifying memories and nightmares so he drank. After becoming sober in the 1980's, Doug has written about his experiences publishing three books of poetry and now his autobiography. The books are an attempt to make sense of his experiences in the war. He writes: "My problem was deeply *moral* – not in the sense of moralizing, but in terms of trying to make sense of genuine evil and the human capacity for endless destruction."¹ A turning point in his life was when he returned to Vietnam for two weeks to meet with former enemies who are now poets. The two weeks of conversation and sharing of stories allowed him to make peace with his previous experiences in Vietnam. He is now seeking to understand God's Way of Love as the true invitation to authentic life. While letting go of old memories isn't easy, he knows that God's love is stronger and more sustaining than evil and destruction.

¹ Anderson, Doug. *Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, The Sixties, and a Journey of Self-Discovery*. p. 178

This is the message Jesus is trying to have people understand in our Gospel reading this morning. The way of God's love heals the wounds of the world. The way of God's love is far more valuable than our own greed and ideology. Most important, the way of God's love is everlasting and eternal. Delightfully, God's love is available for all of us through the breaking of the bread – bread that nourishes our bodies and our souls.

About 12 years ago, back before the interfaith dialogue that we are now engaged in was just beginning, I went to a conference for Spiritual Directors in New Mexico. My friend Cathy Murtha was also there. As many of you know, she is a member of the Roman Catholic Order of Women Religious, The Daughters of Wisdom. One day we had some free time so we decided to visit Chimayo, a tiny chapel in New Mexico known for the healing powers of its dirt. For centuries people of faith have traveled to Chimayo to be healed. The chapel is a lovely old building with Mexican architecture and decorating. Near the altar there is a door to a side room that is filled with crutches and shoes and various personal items that have been left behind by those who have been healed. It is in the side room where pilgrims find the healing dirt. While very different from chapels that I grew up attending, there was a sense of intimacy and compassion housed in the walls.

At 11:00 a.m., Cathy and I decided to attend the mass that was about to be offered so we settled into a pew. The chapel began to fill with people and families who had come to worship. It was touching to see teenage grandsons ushering in feeble grandparents who were seeking strength from the sacredness of the place. The priest gave a beautiful homily about Jesus. I was completely captivated by the love that he conveyed and the sense of God's presence in the worship space. When it was time for communion and the priest announced that anyone who was Catholic was welcome at the table. This announcement came as a bit of a shock to me. I was so taken by the experience of the worship service and my own growing sense of God's love it was hurtful to be excluded from communion. Instead of participating, I watched as others went forward. Cathy got up to receive communion and then came back to sit next to me. I realized she still had her wafer in her hand and she took it, broke it in half and gave half of it to me. This moment of sharing a wafer together was transformative for me. Cathy knew that all are welcome at God's table of love. She made it possible for me to be included.

This is the message of Christ. All are included invited to the table of God's love. All are invited to break bread together and come to know God's Way of Love.

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."

As we receive communion this morning may our hearts be open to the Bread of Life who offers love for the world. Amen.

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