

The Bread of Life

John 6:24-35

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Prayer: *Feed us, O God, in this time we spend together, with bread that is eternal. Reveal to us that Living Presence who brought change and vision to people who were hungry. Fill us with hunger for your love, so that we may feed on the bread of life...*

When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said "Great is the art of beginning, greater is the art of ending," he was talking about writing poetry, of course. You know, they teach you to start with some strong words, and then by the time you end, your words have gained resonance and have increased capacity, you've turned the corner on something and arrived at a new place. That's how poems work. ...Yet, poetry is always about more than one thing.

I officiated at a memorial service here for Betty Leete last summer. She was remembered by her family as having insisted that *too many people are writing poetry and not enough of us are reading it*. They told me that she held poetry nights in her home, everyone was invited to read a poem and listen to others. You didn't need to read your own work – read a good poem, share why you like it, listen to someone else. I've been thinking about that ever since. Which is why I mention it now. Cultivating a creative imagination, making space for it, had a huge effect on the people who participated in those evenings. Still does.

Scripture has that kind of lingering effect. And likewise, it has a great beginning - Genesis, the Exodus story of Moses in the wilderness, the patriarchs, how the people found their way to the land of Cana, how they lost it; how Jesus came among us, how he was crucified, of all people, how he rose from the dead, a greater ending.

The gospel of John plays on language inviting us into the story of faith, not unlike an evening of poetry with good friends. This gospel writer is especially fond of double meaning and misunderstandings:

- Nicodemus is confused in conversation, if Jesus is encouraging him to be born from above, or born all over again¹
- When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, and asks her about the work of her life, and the man she loves now... Is Jesus offering running water (that is moving or flowing water), or living water... and what will slake the thirst you have? ²

¹ John 3:3-5

² John 4:10-11

- Jesus says (in chapter 7) “I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.” Was that about going out for a night in Jerusalem, or was it about the end of his life?³⁴

If you have friends who also attend church, chances are good that they are also hearing a “Bread of Life” message. There is a six-week series here in the summer where the recommended lectionary is “The Bread of Life” over and over -- it’s a long discourse playing on words and meanings. This is the gospel of John’s answer to the sermon on the mount in Matthew. The Bread of Life is about a lot of things, and it is about one thing:

- The bread we eat that leaves us hungry again later,
- the bread that sustains us,
- money is bread,
- the bread you digest and assimilate -- that you partake of, that becomes part of you.
- the bread from heaven (spiritual sustenance),
- and Jesus speaks of eating the bread of suffering...imagine how distasteful.
- He gives bread to his disciples at the last supper he says to them, “this is my body, broken for you.”

It’s all bread of course... but its referring to something well beyond bread. Bread of Life.

Jesus has performed miracles, and he is being followed around by a large crowd; I’ve learned to appreciate Jesus’ mixed feelings about these crowds. He is offering one thing, and they are taking another. The miracle of the loaves and fishes, like the manna in the wilderness in Moses’ time was spectacular. The people were hungry, with nothing to eat, and they were fed! A miracle. But it all points to a deeper miracle, that not everyone is even interested in, what is on offer is bread from heaven, which will sustain you ... spiritually, always. Bread of Life.

Like Esau who traded his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew, because he was hungry in the moment, sometimes we opt for what we need in the moment, rather than taking what will sustain us for the long run. Bread of Life.

I have arrived at my last Sunday with you today, and I likewise have been having conversations with you in the last weeks about the time we have had together and the things that will remain after I have left. There are things that we have done that were not important, and things that we have done that point beyond our lives and this space to something of the presence of the Living Lord in our lives. Bread of Life.

And while I want to affirm for your sake the things that we have accomplished in these 18 months; I also want to point beyond this time to the time to come. The gospel is future facing, and while I can say with full confirmation and gratitude that I have absolutely felt the Holy Spirit working among us in this time, and in many different ways; I want you to have confidence not in

³ John 7:8; another example is 3:14 the serpent in the wilderness is lifted up; either refers to a grisly death or Jesus’ exaltation on the cross

⁴ *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. Raymond E. Brown, ed Francis Moloney; Yale University Press 2003; pp. 288

me, but in the Spirit's ability to continue working here in this church, among this people, as you welcome new people, and consider future challenges together. You can have confidence that this will happen, because it has happened, and because it is God's way to dwell with God's people. It is Bread of Life that is on offer here. Bread of Life.

Many of you in leadership have heard me say that in church administration, (which some of you know can often lean towards high comedy) there are issues that you manage, and other issues that you solve. In the pandemic, we learned to create and post online worship services that reflect this church, included elements from our congregation, faces, issues, conversations and outreach partners. Many of you participated in cyber coffee hour, mastering your own side of the zoom platform. The JP Webster Library hosted a wide range of online programming. We put concerts online, all of this has tremendously boosted the church's visibility. Bread of Life.

First Church Academy for Young Children has been open and operating over a year in the pandemic. We have connected meaningfully with mission partners, helping people through the crisis of the last 18 months. Last summer's Black Lives Matter Prayer Walk hosted many visitors to our front lawn. We renamed the green space in front of the church, laying the groundwork to welcome all manner of celebration of the people whose land this has been. I have enjoyed working on these projects with you; and in each case they point to something important beyond the project itself. Something very like the Bread of Life.

Yet, some things are not resolved, some things need to continue to be managed. You cannot solve human nature or relationships. You cannot solve how you welcome someone new (it's not a perfect art, you just blunder through in the moment) you can't really even solve how you are feeling today. We cannot solve anyone's ability to ask an inconvenient question, their unreasonable faith, or their crisis of the soul. We cannot prevent bad things happening to good people; but we can commit ourselves to creating safe space for each other, being a person who other people can be safe with, and pointing beyond this kind of security to a spiritual security. Bread of Life.

Your next Pastor will be a person with strengths and weaknesses. People who have strengths and weaknesses do best when they are supported, encouraged, and yes, loved.

This is a lot to hold in mind at once. Jesus simplified it when he offered his disciples bread of life: bread from the table, and a cup to share. A symbol of their life together. Reinterpreting the past, looking towards the future. An act and symbol which was great when it was given, and points us toward the greater ending. Bread of Life.

May God bless you and keep you, First Church.

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