

BREAD OF LIFE
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Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 6:35, 41-51

35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...."

47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

48 I am the bread of life....

I grew up in a family where bread was a very big deal. I don't remember a lot about my grandmother, but I sure do remember her bread and bread baking days, at least 4 loaves at time. It was a major production and an unfolding a feast for the senses-- touch, smell, taste. My mother passed on to me what she learned from her mother, as she did to my girls in grandmotherly rituals known only to the participants, but involving both full loaves and mysterious child sized ones as well. My mother translated a received oral tradition in order that it could be passed on. She took the wisdom of "a handful of this, a pinch of that, mix until it feels right" and created the Grandmother's Bread recipe. Which is now being adapted as knowledge, experience and circumstances change--even finding its way to a bread machine version (but please don't tell...). Bread in my experience was (and is) way more than a side dish, its the main event, love embodied.

Bread must have been a pretty big deal for Jesus and his followers, too, because it comes up a lot, as it did for the Jewish ancestors, whose stories shaped Jesus and those around him. After all, in those days, bread was way more than a side dish too, it was the source of life. For the vast majority of people at the time, bread would have provided most of their daily caloric intake. Economic activity would have been largely about obtaining bread. It is no wonder that bread holds such a central place in the stories and images of scripture.

Abraham entertains God's own messengers with freshly baked bread (thanks to Sarah!); bread (unleavened) is at the center of the Passover story; manna, the mysterious bread of the wilderness sustains the Hebrew people in their long desert journey. And in the prayer taught by Jesus, bread is one of the 3 primary petitions—daily bread, sandwiched right there between forgiveness and protection from evil. Our reading today follows immediately after Jesus has taken 5 loaves and 2 fish and fed thousands of hungry people.

Which immediately creates whole a new problem, because now the crowds pursue Jesus intending to force him to become king. "More, give us more!" (And doesn't that sound familiar?) Jesus tells the crowds—and perhaps we should listen in--you've missed the point...again. This is not about bread.. its not about more. Its about life. Eternal life, here and now, where the "more" is built right in.

"I am the bread of life" he tells the crowds. If this sounds bizarre to us, it was bizarre blasphemy to a first century Jew, "I am" being the very name of God heard by Moses in the burning bush. Yahweh. *I am... I am who I am...I am who I am for you...* all of these nuances (and more!) possible in the pliable Hebrew original. And then, the gospel writer riffs on this refrain throughout the entire book. *I am* the bread of life; *I am* the light of the world; *I am* the good shepherd; *I am* the way, the truth and the life; *I am* the gate; *I am* the vine; *I am* the resurrection and the life.

Clearly, this gospel isn't meant for literal interpretation, nor does it really offer us much in a search for the historical Jesus. Composed quite a bit later than the other gospels, and at least 6 or more decades after Jesus' death (several lifetimes in those days), it likely reflects more a community's experience of the risen Christ than concrete memories of the man Jesus. And John explicitly means to offer something more than a newscast; this gospel more than any other offers us a vision of the wisdom Jesus, who was not so much trying to impart information or lay down a discrete set of moral action as he was offering a whole new vision of the world, and a *way* of transformation.

In her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*, my favorite beach reading of the summer, Episcopal priest and scholar Cynthia Bourgeault, claims that Christianity itself is "supremely a wisdom path." This view, she argues, has been underscored again and again over the last several decades in a whole series of archeological discoveries, scholarly advances, and spiritual practices, especially, the recovery of the Christian contemplative tradition. "For the earliest Christians," she writes, "Jesus was not the Savior, but the Life-Giver...salvation was understood as a bestowal of life, and to be saved was to be made alive...a (wisdom) Christianity focuses on *the path*. It emphasizes how Jesus is like us, how what he did... is something we are also called to do..."

According to our reading today: "Whoever believes" ...one might also translate this "All who trust" ... "have" (please note the present tense of the verb) "eternal life." *All who trust have eternal life*—which is to say life abundant. That's the invitation, in the words of Marcus Borg: to trust a reality characterized by cosmic generosity. That invitation—to **all**-- forms the heart of the teaching, life and **way** of Jesus, and its the thread that runs throughout our tradition, sacred stories, practices and faith, and the thread that connects Christianity to the other great wisdom traditions.

"Growth in trust," Borg writes, "...radical trust in God, is radical trust in the One in whom we live and move and have our being...radical trust is what can free us from that self-preoccupation and anxiety that mars our lives and confines (us). It frees us for that self-forgetfulness of faith, for that willingness to live our lives in a way that is spent in the name of a larger vision, that willingness to spend and be spent."

Following "the Way" is *way* more than admiration (of some nice guy named Jesus) or even imitation (I will be a nice guy like Jesus too) its about "putting on the mind of Christ" in the words of the apostle Paul, participating in a living Presence, partaking of the subversive wisdom of a infinitely generous universe.

This is not wisdom that one can acquire, or accumulate. Its a force, a flow, that we can enter into, not by trying *to be wise* or even *to be good*, but rather seeking *to be open*. It's a process we cultivate, more through subtraction than addition—so many assumptions, expectations, aspirations that we need to release in order to make space. Wisdom invites real intentional listening, attentiveness to that living Presence, in the world around us, in our lives, in our hearts, in our stories, and in all of that together--in a community listening, living, and loving--together.

One of my favorite SPC traditions has always been our annual pilgrimage to Jefferson Orchard. Our youth head over there every year, just to break bread and be with our migrant brothers and sisters who work there at this time of year. I love it because its so simple and so, outwardly-by-the-standards-of-the-world, pointless, one might even say subversive. We aren't really there to "feed the hungry"—these folks have beans and rice and enchiladas that are every bit the Sunday feast as our fried chicken and potato salad. We're not really there "to help", although we may bring with us some supplies now and then (God knows we have way more than our share). And we certainly aren't there to "win souls for Jesus," its just not our style, although I

suspect its taken the folks there a more than a few years to really believe that. I think we're there mostly to be present. To be open. To be willing to receive from members of our community that tend to be invisible or worse. And I am convinced that in our simple presence there, year after year after year, whether we ever know it or not, we receive far more than we could ever give. In the end, its not about us, and its not about them, its about the whole: "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread," wrote the apostle Paul. Last Sunday one of those men came and worshipped here with us. A small thing perhaps, but profound, because by his presence we were, in some inexplicable way, made more whole, more connected. I don't know what that means, but I do know its an invitation to listen.

So, maybe this is about bread after all. In the Aramaic of Jesus there is actually a connection between the word for "daily bread" and the name of Holy Wisdom. After all, whenever we share this bread and the cup (table), we open wide our arms and hearts and welcome **all**, including the presence of Living Wisdom in our midst. Its the model for every meal, and every act of radical hospitality. Every intention for forgiveness (whether we ever get there or not), every act of reconciliation (even if it falls short), every bridge across human separation, every act of self giving love, every desire, every prayer for wholeness increases the reach and power of Holy Wisdom in the world. So maybe it is about daily bread—and more; sharing bread—and more. Wisdom invites us to become bread. And--to trust that, to honor and celebrate; to listen deeply, and seek to discover what becoming bread might mean right here and now. And again tomorrow. And, eternally. Amen