

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Bread of Life"

SERMON TEXT: John 6:8-12, 31-35, 47-51

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: March 3, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

We're not quite halfway through Lent yet. As you recall, Lent is the season of 40 days plus six Sundays before Easter. The season of Lent has traditionally been a time when Christians fasted—or at least sacrificed something—in solidarity with the 40 days that Jesus fasted in the wilderness. With hungry bellies, we recall Jesus' temptation to turn stones into bread, and we're reminded of his response that humans don't live by bread alone, but by the word of God.

And yet, we also know that food was important to Jesus. He enjoyed eating with his friends, with his disciples, and even with tax collectors and sinners. And, within the four gospels, the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the multitude is told six times. So, it's no wonder that, among the many "I Am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, one of them refers to food. Over the past two Sundays, we talked about Jesus' statements "I am the light of the world" and "I am the good shepherd." In upcoming Sundays, we will discuss "I am the vine," and "I am the gate." This morning, I invite you to ponder with me Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life."

1—GOD PROVIDES FOR OUR PHYSICAL NEEDS

The first and most obvious meaning of "I am the bread of life" is that God provides for our physical needs. By using the words "I am," Jesus was identifying himself with God, who spoke from the burning bush and mysteriously told Moses, "I am who I am." At that moment in time, God refused to be defined any more specifically than that. But, as God led Moses and the Hebrew people through their wilderness wanderings toward the land of Canaan, God revealed the divine nature in many ways. One of those was by providing manna in the desert. When the people were hungry, God cared, and God provided them a miraculous bread from heaven called manna.

Because Jesus was God in the flesh, Jesus acted in similar ways, providing bread for the hungry. Here in John 6, we read the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. After the crowd had gathered and listened to Jesus' teaching for some time, the disciple Andrew located a boy who was willing to share his food. From those five small barley loaves and two fish, Jesus was able to multiply more than enough to feed the hungry crowd.

These two examples of the divine provision of food are evidence to us that Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life," were meant to include loaves that would satisfy a physical need. Today we believe that God and Jesus continue to feed those whose bodies are hungry. This happens through God's creative care in providing sun, dirt, moisture, seeds, and other natural conditions conducive to agriculture. Our divine creator makes bread possible through smart and talented people who grind grain and bake bread. God has given most of us healthy bodies that have been able to work and earn a living, so we can buy bread. And we who follow Jesus are inspired by his example and teachings to share bread through food pantries, soup kitchens, and governmental policies that care for the disabled and poor. In places like Gaza, where people are starving to death, we know that God desires peace, so that food can be delivered to those so desperately in need.

2—GOD PROVIDES FOR OUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," a second meaning was that God will provide for our spiritual needs. That's why this bread of life is even better than the Jewish ancestors' manna from heaven. That's why this bread of life is even better than the multiplied loaves that had just fed the multitude. As wonderful and miraculous as those kinds of physical bread are, we human beings need more. In John 6:58, Jesus reminded his Jewish listeners that the manna from heaven filled the bellies of their Hebrew ancestors and satisfied them for a time. But eventually, those folks all died off. No matter how much material bread God provides for us, it won't keep us alive forever. Wheat,

barley, rye, and gluten-free aren't enough. For ultimate satisfaction, we need to feast on the bread of life that nourishes our souls.

The Gospel of John calls this ultimate satisfaction “eternal life.” Bible scholars explain that, in John's Gospel, “eternal life” has two different nuances of meaning. One is time based, as in the life we have with God that goes on forever and ever, starting at the time of our death. The other meaning of eternal life is a quality of life that begins now, even while we are still alive. In other words, we don't have to wait until we die to begin experiencing eternal life.

Whenever we eat of Jesus-the-bread-of-life, we gain hope, purpose, and direction. As soon as we eat of Jesus-the-bread-of-life, we begin growing in peace, justice, and wisdom. When we eat of the bread of life, it's like a comfort food that surrounds us with love, healing, and nurture. Or, if we're too comfortable, the bread of life can also motivate and energize us to climb out of our ruts of complacency. When we eat the bread of life, we so follow the example of Christ that we advocate for the poor and downtrodden, the under-privileged and under-served—even if that means confronting the people and places of power in our society—even if that means carrying the cross of suffering. Eating the bread of eternal life doesn't necessarily mean we'll live longer in these bodies, but it does mean that the life we live now is a part of God's eternal purpose.

As a preacher, I'm always saving articles and website links to stories and illustrations I might use someday. Last June, I saved a news report I thought might come in handy during Lent. It's the story of four children in the South American country of Colombia who were rescued out of the Amazon jungle after being lost for 40 days. The indigenous children, their mother, the pilot, and another man were flying to Bogota, where their father had gone ahead to help them establish a new life. But, for some reason, their small airplane crashed in the dense forest. After 16 days, a search and rescue team found the crashed plane and the bodies of the three adults who had all died. But the children weren't there. So, the search through the thick jungle continued with more than 100

Colombian special forces plus over 70 indigenous scouts. Finally, on the 40th day after the airplane crashed, the children were found. Ages 13, 9, 5, and a baby of 11 months, the children were extremely weak and malnourished, but they had managed to stay together and alive for 40 days. Because of their indigenous training, they had been able to create shelter and avoid predators. And they knew which jungle fruits, nuts, and seeds were possible to eat.

That news report was a story about God's provision of physical food in the jungle. But, to the citizens of Colombia, it was also a spiritual story. It was a story about Colombian children who had the spunk and spirit of their indigenous culture. It was a story about overcoming tremendously difficult odds and victory over death. It was a story about resilience, perseverance, and courage on the part of both the children and their rescuers. It was the kind of true story that a movie could be made about, and even though everyone would already know how it turns out, there would be tears and hurrahs and laughter. It would be that kind of spiritual story like how we human beings on our own are doomed by sin, but when Jesus comes and lifts us up, we can have eternal life after we die and, in fact, can begin our eternal life in our spirits already, even now.

3—GOD IS PRESENT WITH US IN THE SACRAMENTAL MEAL

So, when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," he wanted to convey a divine provision for both the body and the soul. And that strong combination of meaning is especially poignant to us in the sacramental meal. The Last Supper isn't described until John chapter 13, but here in chapter six, we see the ingredients gathered and mixed. When we participate in Holy Communion, God becomes incarnate among us. Just as God was once present in the human flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, now God is present with us in the bread and the juice.

In the first and second centuries of Christianity, many people refused to accept Christian beliefs because they were turned off by the cannibalistic idea of eating Christ's flesh and drinking Christ's blood. Even today, I find that to be an unpleasant concept. I've always been glad that we

Protestants believe that the consecrated bread and cup are symbolic and metaphorical, that they are served in remembrance of Jesus, rather than the Catholic belief that, during the mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.

Either way, though, what's important for us to recognize is that—just as God could be fully present in the human being Jesus—so can God be present in the bread and juice that we touch with our hands and taste with our mouths. This bread feeds our bodies, and this God nourishes our souls. In this act of worship, in this sacramental act of Christians gathered together in faith community, God is here.

CONCLUSION

And, so, in a few minutes, we will celebrate holy communion, as a way to nourish our bodies and our spirits with the one who is the bread of life. As we sang earlier, we lift this prayer to God:

With joyful lips we sing to you
our praise and gratitude,
that you should count us worthy, Lord,
to share this heavenly food.
You satisfy the hungry heart
with gift of finest wheat.
Come, give to us, O saving Lord,
the bread of life to eat.*

Amen!

*Lyrics by Omer Westendorf, 1977, c. 1977 Archdiocese of Philadelphia.