

Proper 13 B
John 6:24-35
August 1, 2021

“Bread and this Bread”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God has set God’s seal. Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent. So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “God gave them bread from heaven to eat.” Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is God who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

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.

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My mother has always baked bread. As a child, it seemed strange when mom would ask us to “remind her to feed her bread.” Mom did bread the old school way. She had a mysterious pale of pungent-smelling ooze that literally lived in our refrigerator. This ooze actually needed to be fed and its favorite source of sustenance was potato flakes—the kind used to make instant mashed potatoes, which, by the way, we did not eat. But the ooze loved them. More accurately, I suppose, the ooze is called a “starter.” As the starter grew, usually every few days, mom uses a portion of it to bake bread. She always bakes 4 loaves at a time. As a kid, these loaves would sit over night on TV trays next to the fireplace in the living room. The bread rises and puffs up until it’s literally coming over the sides of the glass bread pans, filling the house with a yeasty scent.

When baked, the loaves are big with muffin-like tops of golden brown and soft, white, spongy, centers. There is no better bread for toasting or for toasted cheese sandwiches on the entire planet! My mother’s bread is simply the stuff of poetry. Now, living alone, my mother still bakes her bread and she delivers it to neighbors—those she knows and those she hopes to. It’s all really quite beautiful.

Our text this morning from John’s gospel culminates with Jesus making a rather strange claim: “I am the bread of life,” he says. Despite this claim, none of the paintings, sculptures, or icons that I’ve seen ever attempt to portray Jesus as something resembling my mother’s bread! The closest most artists seem to come is a portrait of a rather saintly looking white man with a somewhat pained look on his face, holding up a white disk that in no way resembles my mother’s bread, or anything I’d actually want to eat! Perhaps, this text makes better sense to those of you who’ve found your way to New England Church via one of the more sacramental or Eucharistic traditions. For the rest of us, let’s take a closer look back at the story and see if we can get at the heart of Jesus’ meaning.

Last week, we heard of Jesus feeding 5,000 with just five small loaves and two little fish. Apparently, the crowd had followed him and our story picks up as the crowd, now hungry again, catches up with their teacher.

The first words out of Jesus' mouth seem a little dejected and, perhaps harsh. "You're only looking for me because I fed you last time. Work," he says, "for the nonperishable food of God's unending presence."

To hungry people, I'm guessing those words meant very little. Mahatma Gandhi once said that, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." And yet, the crowd that followed Jesus is undeterred. "What must we do to perform the works of God?" they ask him. Jesus responds that they must believe in the one God sent. Slyly, the crowd gets back to the matter of food, "What sign will you perform to show us that you're that one? Our hungry ancestors ate bread from heaven in the wilderness." Jesus doesn't take the bait, however. He responds, "It wasn't Moses who gave them bread in the wilderness, it was God, who gave it and God who gives true bread from heaven that comes down and gives life to the world." "We'll take it!" the crowd eagerly responded. Jesus concludes: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

This story paints Jesus and the crowd as two ships passing in the night without every really seeing one another, hearing one another, or understanding. I can't help but think that the crowd was referring to something not unlike my mother's bread and Jesus, well, to something else entirely.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that, "The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus . . . said 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread." Apparently, having already ministered to this crowd's physical needs, he aimed to meet another need entirely. There's bread and then there's *this bread*. I'm just not sure what this *bread* is. Are you?

The easy answer would be to suggest that since he'd already ministered to their physical needs, Jesus wanted to minister to their spiritual needs. That's too easy, though, and it perpetuates an artificial dichotomy

between the body and the spirit, earth and heaven, life now and some hoped-for future. That's not what Jesus was about. No, he understood that body and spirit weren't separate entities like the Greeks thought. He understood the goal to be heaven on earth and not heaven after earth. He preached the abundant life of the unending divine presence here and now and for all—not later, somewhere else, for some. So, the idea that somehow physical bread, like my mother's, would minister to the body while the "bread of life" would minister to the spirit just doesn't work. We're left with the question of what, then, *did* he mean and why *does* it matter for us.

It's likely clear to at least some, that Jesus was speaking here in metaphor and there's little question that he was a veritable master of metaphor—at least he's portrayed as such by all four gospel writers. Over the next 5 weeks, the lectionary will have us explore this particular metaphor, "the bread of life," and wrestle with what it means for us as a community and as individual people of faith. One thing it does not mean, I can assure you, is that churches are called to provide spiritual food for spiritual needs, while food pantries are called to provide physical food for physical needs.

Today, I invite you to begin to consider how your faith, how *our* faith, is good news, not just for us in here, but our world out there—the physical, lived-in world of here and now. How is our faith good news for the world?

I'll close now with the words of a thoughtful poem by English poet, priest, and academic Malcom Guite. He writes:

Where to get bread? An ever-pressing question
That trembles on the lips of anxious mothers,
Bread for their families, bread for all these others;
A whole world on the margin of exhaustion.
And where that hunger has been satisfied

Where to get bread? The question still returns
In our abundance something starves and yearns

We crave fulfillment, crave and are denied.
And then comes One who speaks into our needs
Who opens out the secret hopes we cherish
Whose presence calls our hidden hearts to flourish
Whose words unfold in us like living seeds

Come to me, broken, hungry, incomplete,
I Am the Bread of Life, break Me and eat.¹

Amen.

¹ Guite, Malcom. "Parable and Paradox." Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016.