

John 6:35, 41–51  
Proper 14 B  
August 8, 2021

*On Being Bread*  
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*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.*

*Then the religious leaders began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven”?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the God who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from God comes to me. Not that anyone has seen God except the one who is from God; he has seen God. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’*

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Perhaps you’ve noticed that the Jesus of John’s gospel is quite a bit different from the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, Jesus is portrayed as the Word Made Flesh and the Lamb of God; as one who is in full communion with God and who speaks with confidence about his

own divinity; as one whose death on the cross was not simply a consequence of poking the proverbial bear that was imperial Rome, but a death that was both sacrifice and, ultimately, salvation. In all honesty, the Gospel According to John is more about theology and Christology than it is about history. It's more about interpreting the life, ministry, and death of Jesus than it is about simply recounting those events in a historical manner.

Most scholars agree that this gospel interprets these events for a community of pro-Jesus Jewish people in the time after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Rome and the downfall of the priestly and sacrificial systems that governed it. In addition, it is widely believed that this community had also been expelled from synagogue Judaism for its belief in Jesus as the Messiah. This was a community that was cut off from its historical tradition and the gospel it produced attempts to connect Jesus to both the now defunct Temple system of their ancestors and the messianic fervor of their day—the hope that God was about to enter time and space and establish the realm of heaven on earth. John's gospel was written between 90 and 110 C.E. and is the newest of the Bible's four gospels.

All this serves as background for what I'm about to say, or rather, to reiterate from my sermon last week. The words of Jesus can be understood here, and at times elsewhere, as metaphor—as pointing beyond the literal words themselves to a deeper truth, a richer meaning. “I am the bread of life . . . whoever believes has eternal life.” We know that Jesus is not bread. Does that mean that since we don't “believe,” we are ineligible for eternal life? I don't think so. But this sermon isn't really about belief. It's about Jesus claiming to be bread. He is flesh and bone and blood. He is not bread. He is obviously not bread. However, this metaphor points beyond the obvious to that which is less apparent. In some way, the author believes that Jesus functions as the bread of life for

their community and for the world. How he does so, is what's of primary interest for us today.

So, the question is a simple one: Why Bread? Several reasons. Firstly, bread is a reference back to the time when manna from heaven sustained the Hebrew people during their 40 years in the wilderness—the metaphor is a connection to the community's history. Secondly, bread was the staple food of people in that day, and it would be for centuries after that in many parts of the world. In a world where more than 50% of a person's daily caloric intake came from bread, it's a whole lot more relatable than saying something like, "I am the cake of life." Thirdly, the word *bread* could be taken to mean *food*, in general. Besides sustaining us for living, food plays an important role in our lives.

We use food to celebrate: feasts and parties, special dinners, and seasonal treats. We use food to cope: junk food, fast food, snack food. We use food to communicate. A seminary professor of mine referred to the way we share food with folks who are grieving. "The food says 'I love you,'"<sup>1</sup> he stated in a sermon. It's true, isn't it? How many of us prepare a casserole to take over when someone passes, or send chocolates on Valentine's Day? Sometimes the food communicates our love far better than mere words could on their own. And, food brings us together. I personally love hosting friends for meals, but it's not ultimately about the food, is it? No more than Thanksgiving is really about turkey, or Easter about eggs, or Christmas about candy canes. The food, though, brings us together for something far more important than the food itself—it brings us together for relationship. And that's what really sustains us.

When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," I wonder if he could mean that his life brings people together and nurtures relationships; that his life says

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson. "B37: "The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (2015)," Asermonforeverysunday.com, August 9, 2015, <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b37-the-eleventh-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b/>.

“I love you” in actions when words just don’t get the job done; that his life comforts those who are grieving, companions those who are coping, and celebrates with those who are reveling.

It’s really not all that hard to imagine, is it? We’ve all been nurtured by others in our lives. We’ve all been “fed,” so to speak, by a significant relationship with another person or community, haven’t we? And “what if rather than making an exclusive claim about himself [, the Jesus of John’s gospel] is giving us the recipe to become as he is, to become the bread of life for the world?”<sup>23</sup> What if Jesus is empowering his followers to be as he is: a comforter, a companion, and a celebrant, nurturing others and communities and the world?

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. And the truth is, so am I. And so are you, and you, and you. So go forth and do what bread does: nourish and nurture, comfort and companion, celebrate and satiate. Go forth and do what bread does, until all have been well fed. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael K. Marsh. “Could we be the bread of life?” Interruptingthesilence.com, August 23, 2018: <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2018/08/23/could-we-be-the-bread-of-life-a-sermon-on-john-635-41-51/>.