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## Bread

(John 6:27-29, 35, 47-51) "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 the Father has set his seal." 28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.... 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. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 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."

My junior year in college, I shared a house with three other guys. A four-bedroom, three-bath house. For \$160 a month. Those were the days. And, as you might suspect with four guys, there are a lot of stories I could tell from that year, although it would probably be wiser for me to take the Fifth Amendment on some of them on the grounds that they would very much tend to incriminate me. But I will tell you one this morning, although some of you have heard it before. Even with our \$40 per-person-per-month rent, each of us was always out of money come month's end. This was when the minimum wage – what each of us made for our on-campus part-time jobs – was \$1.65 a hour. One of the things that we had become known for was our chili parties. This was in Texas and we thought that it was so manly and macho to make chili that was so spicy it could peel paint off the walls. We would invite people over for a chili dinner; we would all sit there pretending to enjoy this industrial strength chili, tears streaming down our faces because it was so devastating on our taste buds, and yet telling each other how good it was. No one wanted to be the first to flinch. It's a wonder we had any friends left.

At one of these chili parties, I decided to experiment and make some bread. I'd heard about "beer bread" and so I got out the Bisquik – the college student's ubiquitous friend – and added a can of Walgreens beer. This was a short-lived period in which

Walgreens had its own house-label beer and wines. The beer was seventy-nine cents a six pack. You know it was quality stuff. Well, I whipped up a batch of dough using the beer and Bisquik, and put it in the oven. And as it baked, it smelled absolutely wonderful. And when it was beautifully brown, I took it out of the oven, cut a slice, buttered it, and tasted it. It was utterly inedible. It tasted like one might imagine hot beer-infused sawdust might taste. We decided to serve tortilla chips instead.

But the thing was, that loaf of beer bread **looked** wonderful! And the aroma was fantastic. But it tasted awful. It turned out to be utterly unsatisfying. Now, I don't know if any of those in the crowd to whom Jesus addressed his teaching for today – the very first of the great "I Am" statements in John's gospel – had ever made their own ancient middle eastern version of beer bread. I don't know if anybody had the bright idea of cooking up , say, fish bread using matzoh dough and some of the leftover fish from yesterday's lunch – with a little wine thrown in for good measure. But I do suspect that every one of those in that crowd had at one time or another also found themselves seeking nourishment, seeking sustenance in something that looked good, smelled good, seemed attractive, made their mouths water – but which ultimately **did not satisfy**.

Which ultimately **did not satisfy**. That's the human condition and experience, isn't it?. All of us indeed have known times in our lives when something – a decision, a direction, a choice – *looked* really, really attractive, but ended up instead being utterly lacking in any real nourishment for our life's journey. And so the reason why I think that this particular "I Am" statement comes first is because, indeed, physical sustenance is our first need as human beings. If we do not eat things that sustain us, then it will be hard to do anything else. But of course, Jesus' statement is also first because he's clearly speaking in a metaphor here – "I am the bread of life" or, if you prefer "The bread of life – that's me" – and he is clearly recognizing and acknowledging that your and my first **spiritual** need is also for something that sustains us, some sort of meaning to life that is

satisfying, some sort of hope that does not disappoint us. And Jesus also knows that there are many, many, many things out there in our world that *purport* to be meaningful, that *promise* to provide sustenance for your and my journey in life, many things that, as it were, look good and smell great – but end up being as if they were ashes in our mouths, leaving us hungrier than even before.

So this is a teaching about what it is that makes life meaningful. And I suggest that Jesus' teaching, repeated three times and yet in three different ways, is also telling us three different things about what makes for meaningfulness in life. First, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Now, it's important to note where this statement comes in the overall story as John tells it: it comes immediately following Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the 5000. And I think that that chronology is meant to emphasize the point that while real, physical bread is important and even essential for physical life, it is also utterly essential that life have meaning. And so this juxtaposition of real bread and the "Bread of life" is Jesus' way of reminding us that finally it is not just things, it is not stuff, it is not the satisfaction of our physical wants or desires, it is not the feeding of your craving or mine for toys or travel or things that satisfies ultimately. No, what is finally and truly satisfying, what finally and truly gives life is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

When I was four or five, I think, "Wonder Bread" was all the rage among the pre-school set. Not so much because it was very good, but because the Wonder Bread people had decided on a new packaging, and the end of each loaf had this easy-to-open zipper-thing on it. Well, I remember the glee on Saturday morning, at our little neighborhood grocery store, when my friend and I went around, when the owner wasn't looking, and yanked the little zippers on every loaf of bread in that store and poked our finger into the bread. Now, of course, once that little zipper had been yanked it couldn't be undone; the package was now open. Which, of course, meant the bread was ruined; you couldn't sell bread that had a preschooler finger-poke hole in it! But we thought it was the greatest fun

to rip those ends of those packages and poke that bread; it felt so good and smelled so good. It was fun, anyway, until the owner called our parents and my father had to come buy 30 loaves of opened, pinky-poked bread packages. But don't we all know, in an adult version of this, folks who behave in the same way? Folks who frantically run through their lives, searching for something that is truly meaningful, that truly satisfies, ripping the ends of, if you will, the packages of this goody or that thing or this other belief and dipping a finger inside – but ultimately finding themselves still hungry. I'll bet you know some folks like that; I'll bet at one time or another you've been one of them. I know I have.

And so I think that is indeed the first lesson we learn from Jesus' teaching here: if you are finding yourself hungry for meaning, if you are finding yourself having too many of those is-this-all-there-is moments, if you are finding old pattern of actions – nursing that hurt, cherishing that wound, believing that you aren't good enough or smart enough – are leaving the stomach of your soul with hunger pangs, or if you are one who is frantically tearing open this package and that package to find something that satisfies, then Jesus is saying to you: that sustenance you're seeking? It's me. It's me.

If Jesus' first point here is that a relationship with Him is what will make for the most fully satisfying life in the midst of too many other things that may promise satisfaction but which will finally leave us hungry, his second point is found in the distinctive way he says this the second time. Did you hear it? He said: "*I am the **living** bread.*" Think for a moment about the best meals you have ever had. It doesn't matter whether it was fancy or plain. But what are those meals that your memory counts as most remarkable? I am willing to wager that they involved other persons, rather than sometime when you ate by yourself. Am I right? I think of the picnic that Barbara and I shared now almost three decades ago, spread on a blanket in a little state park in southern Indiana when we were first dating. It's one of the best meals in my memory. But I can't tell you for sure what we

ate. But I can remember that wonderful hope that she might be the one, that our lives might come together, that together we could be so much more than we could be alone. For you see, both making meals and making **meaning** are activities that are best done with other people. When you help make a meal for someone else you pour not just the physical ingredients into it, you also blend in your love and your affection and your hopes that it will be something pleasurable. And when you gather together to worship, to pray, to study with fellow church members and fellow Christians, it is the same: the meaning that you make together is so much more than the meaning that you can find and make out of life all by yourself. Do you remember the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones? One of the ways that he knew that those bones are described as being dead is that they are cut off from others. It is the same with the **living** bread of Christ – the meaning of Christ for your life and my life is best known and most satisfying and most hunger-assuaging when we find that meaning together. The Christ who wants life abundant and eternal, who wants your life and mine to be meaningful, is always best experienced in a community of those who are also hungry. As one writer put it, the Christian life is one hungry traveler telling another traveler where to find bread.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, Jesus speaks of himself as bread in a third way: I am the bread **come down from heaven**. "Come down from heaven." There are so many breads all around us that are NOT from heaven. There is such a difference between the aroma of a Blueberry PopTart (which I confess to loving) and the deeper, "thicker", more satisfying, more wonderful aroma of homemade bread (which does not involve Bisquik and beer!), or the mouth-watering smell of the homemade sweet rolls that Barbara makes. PopTarts, as yummy as they are once in awhile, are not from heaven; they are just not in the league with

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<sup>1</sup>Attributed to Delos Miles: Evangelism is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." [http://images.acswebnetworks.com/qimages/acs/ilapp1\\_7/The\\_Missions\\_Link\\_FebruaryMay200.pdf](http://images.acswebnetworks.com/qimages/acs/ilapp1_7/The_Missions_Link_FebruaryMay200.pdf)

a loaf of handcrafted, hand-loved bread or a pan of rolls. And so it is with life: Jesus' statement is a reminder and warning – not everything that appears to offer sustenance and hope and meaning will do so. It may sound good. It may smell good. But the meaning that it offers is from somewhere other than heaven, somewhere other than God.

Scholars debate whether these statements of Jesus were meant by him to be talking about Communion, the Lord's Supper. But whether meant by him in this way, the Church surely came to recognize that the chief sign and symbol of the overflowing hospitality and generosity – “radical hospitality” and “outrageous generosity” as our own Mission and Vision statement puts it – of God was indeed to be found at the Table where we gather every Sunday. Because we don't have communion just because Jesus told us to do it. We do it because amidst all the offerings of junk food meanings that surround us in our culture and all the claimants that falsely tell us that they are what will truly satisfy our hunger for meaning we need to be returned with all of our senses – sight, sense, touch, smell, taste – and be reminded that the meaning of life that never dies, the meaning of life that is abundant even when life is hard or painful, is to be found in Jesus' very own life. When we are hungry for reassurance, when we are hungry for hope, when too many empty calories from too many shrill voices and hurtful people and perplexing problems have left us with a gnawing in our bellies, we come to this Table, where indeed we find the bread of heaven, the bread of hope, the bread of life abundant and life eternal. “Eat this bread, drink this cup, come to Me and never be hungry.” Indeed let us come in a few moments to this table with that kind of joy, appetites whetted, ready to be truly fed, truly nourished. Amen.