

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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I Am/We Are: A Series on Jesus' "I Am" Statements I. Hungering For..

John 6:35-40 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. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

For the last fifteen years, I have been a member and active participant on an internet discussion site. And while that site is primarily devoted to travel, it also has discussions of all sorts of things. One of my favorite ongoing discussions on that site concerns people's "personal food rules."¹ I never realized that there were so many neurotic people out there..... One of the most often-commented on "food rule" concerns bread. There are folks whose "personal food rules" include only eating whole wheat bread, or never eating whole wheat bread. Or only eating bread that is no more than so many hours old. Or only eating bread with the crusts cut off. And so on and so on. And, relatedly, here also many folks who have strong personal feelings and "personal food rules" about toast – some will only eat toast that has been toasted on one side in the oven; others will never eat toast unless it is done on both sides. Some won't eat toast unless its burnt (really); others prefer toast so lightly toasted it's hard to tell the

¹<http://www.flyertalk.com/forum/diningbuzz/578818-your-personal-food-rules.html>

difference between it and stale bread. Of course, I can't feel too smug about all these "personal food rules"; I have lots of my own. Many of those involve vegetables or the lack thereof. But I too have a toast rule: I love peanut butter on toast, but hate melted peanut butter. So the toast must be room temperature. And so there has been many a morning when I've been in a hurry and found myself standing over the sink, a piece of toast in each hand, flapping my arms like an ungainly bird in order to rapidly cool my toast to room temperature. I will not be posting that picture on Facebook.

Bread. It is ubiquitous. It is ordinary. It is a part of every culture on earth in some fashion. Baked, fried, steamed, even boiled. Sangak, taboon, tortilla, bagel, cornbread, sadza, and on and on from every part of the world. Archeologists have discovered evidence of bread-making going back 30,000 years.² And it was this ordinary, ubiquitous item of daily life that Jesus used to talk about who he was: "I am the bread of life." This saying, the first of what scholars call Jesus' "I am" statements are found only in this form in the gospel of John, and these sayings shall be our guide in the coming few weeks up until Pentecost as we look at what these sayings teach us about God and Christ, what they teach us about ourselves, and what they teach us about the church.

First, though, let's put Jesus' saying in its proper context. As always, we must remember that Jesus was a devout Jew, one whom his contemporaries called "rabbi," and virtually everything he said was rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. So, when Jesus says "'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry....'" and that he

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_bread

is the bread “come down from heaven” he is reminding his hearers of how God provided for the Hebrew people during their flight from Egypt by feeding them manna that also came down from heaven and which ensured that they would also not be hungry on their journey. So first of all, let us never make the mistake of thinking that Jesus has somehow come to replace the Jewish people in God’s love, for that attitude has led to the most hideous sorts of persecutions and even genocide as Christians presumed that God had now rejected and replaced the Jewish people. No, Jesus’ reference to God’s feeding the Hebrew people so long ago is now meant to explicitly enlarge that circle of grace and nourishment so that, thanks be to God, the gospel can also come down to you and to me. But it only does so because God first fed and cared for – and continues to feed and care for – the Jewish people whom we Christians, as Paul puts it, have been graciously grafted onto.

So what is the good news that Jesus is now offering to non-Jewish hearers like you and me? Well, Jesus here is explicitly promising eternal life. For you see, in Jesus’ day, and John’s day sixty years after Jesus, there were a variety of Jewish “denominations,” just like there are a variety of Christian denominations in our day, each of them with a somewhat different “take” on things, each of them emphasizing somewhat different things. Some of the those Jewish traditions did not believe in life after death. So part of what Jesus’ is saying is that he is identifying with those Jews who did believe that God’s care and feeding was not just in this life, but would indeed last forever and that in some way each life would continue even after death.

That is news for which we are grateful indeed. Every one of us in this room has been touched by death and it is a comfort to know that our loved ones’ lives are not

simply and only held in our imperfect and mortal memories. But there is something just as profound to notice in the way Jesus talks about eternal life here. In every case where Jesus talks about having eternal life **the verb is in the *present* tense.**³ In other words, Jesus is telling us not just something about what happens after death but something about the way our lives can be lived here and now. So the question then becomes, what might it mean to say that we already have eternal life in the present? I want to suggest three things, things that tell us about how we can live our lives and how our church can live its life and carry out its ministries.

First, “eternal” life is not just about transcending our mortality. It is also the reminder that, as the verb tense implies, that God has given to us everything we need for abundant life now. A pastor by the name of Peter Woods paraphrases Jesus’ words in this way: *“For you to have earthly bread requires the sweat of your brow....[This] bread of life is offered to all who are hungry enough to trust that five barley loaves and two fish can feed a multitude.”*⁴ The reference here is, of course, to Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 with a few loaves and fish. And what Jesus is trying to teach us, I believe is this: in the Kingdom of God, in the eternal life available to us even now, there is to be no hoarding, there is to be no uncharitable assumptions about one’s neighbor, there is to be no acting as if God really isn’t as strong as the powers of hurt and pain. God cares for everyone – even the folks we don’t care for, even the folks whom we are tempted to despise – and the miracle of loaves and fishes, the miracle of unceasing

³<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x35.htm>

⁴<http://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/08/07/what-beggars-know-about-bread-john-635-51-ordinary-19b/>

manna in the wilderness, reminds us that God's grace is for everyone and we ought therefore never write anyone off, give a less than full-throated welcome to those who are "different," and that eternal unbounded love can make friends out of enemies and never ceases to seek the good for all, to seek justice for all.

Second, again in Pastor Woods' paraphrase of Jesus' words, he has Jesus go on to say "*This bread is me and it is offered for the life of the whole [world]. There is nothing [for you] to achieve or to do. You are not the baker nor the distributor. You are just another hungry pilgrim... in the wilderness.*"⁵ "**You are not the baker nor the distributor.**" Do you ever need to hear those words? I know I do. For sometimes I really act like I would prefer score-keeping to grace. I want to think that whatever I have received I've deserved it. I don't want to be beholden to anyone. I don't want to be in the position where I need to be offered forgiveness. I want to never mess up. I want to be in charge of everything and am sometimes secretly convinced that I'd do a better job of it. But the eternal life that is possible even now that Jesus offers will have none of that. Because, like it or not, grace is my lot in life. God love me – and loves you and this whole world – despite what we have or have not achieved. And in my better moments I know that it is indeed an amazing and wondrous thing that God **doesn't** treat me like I deserve to be treated – that God knows the secret resentments I harbor, the hurts I've done, the people I've wronged, and still loves me. If God treated any one of us simply as we deserve, if we received that bread of life based on whether we had earned it or not, then that would only bring despair. But indeed, I'm not the baker of the

⁵Ibid.

bread, and I'm not the one who decides who is deserving of it; no, it is a gift freely given and Jesus invites us to graciously receive it not because we deserve it, but simply because God loves us because that is who God is.

So, if the first two points about Jesus' saying are that life eternal and abundant are possible even now, and that that possibility is simply a free gift from God based not on what we merit or earn or deserve, the third point is this: Precisely **because** of those things, we are called to share that bread, share that good news, not just by telling folks that God is grace unbounded but by truly sharing all the good gifts that have come our way. Just like the manna in the wilderness that couldn't be hoarded, what we receive in this life is meant to be shared. Let me tell you a story:

Mother Teresa... tells of how she came across a Hindu family in India that had not eaten for days. She took them a small amount of rice. She was very surprised at what happened when she did so. Very quickly the mother of the family had divided the rice into two halves. Then she took half of it to the family next door, which happened to be a Moslem family. Mother Teresa asked, "How could you have any left over? there are many of you." The woman simply replied. "But they have not eaten for days either!"⁶

My friends, the gift of eternal and abundant life in Christ that is offered to you and to all is an invitation to each one of us to ask ourselves who around us has not eaten for days? Who around us needs our gifts of time, talent, and money to know better God's hope that all would have the basic needs of food and shelter? And who around us has

⁶http://www.bibleclaret.org/liturgy/daily/sundays_pierse/cycleB/B_19thSunOT.htm

only eaten the un-satisfying but too-often-sadly filling food of those who would describe God as mean and judgmental, who don't know the God we know, who don't know that there is a church that is not banal, bigoted, or boring?

And "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.'" Who will you tell, who will you show, who will you help feed?