

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 5, 2018, AT BETHANY BEACH
CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

One of my sister's wedding presents was a toaster oven. After a few days, she and her husband tried it out. Almost immediately, smoke billowed out of the toaster. "Get the owner's manual!" her husband shouted.

"I can't find it anywhere!" she cried, searching through the box.

"Oops!" came a voice from the kitchen. "Well, the toast is fine, but the owner's manual is burnt to a crisp."ⁱ

Sometimes things don't turn out the way one was hoping. In this morning's gospel, Jesus and His disciples had gone away for some quiet time once again, only to have things thwarted by the crowds that followed them everywhere they went. "Apparently not satisfied by Jesus' feeding of the 5000, some who were there press him for a sign of his power; perhaps it is daily manna they want. As always in John's gospel, when people want a sign, Jesus offers himself. He is the bread come from heaven to give life to the world. He calls on us to come to him and believe in him, and through that relationship to know the one who sent him."ⁱⁱ

So, now that we know what the sign is, and we have received it, what more do we want? More; we always want more, because once we have what we have wished for we're tempted to think, could I have done better? What is there out there that I've not availed myself of as yet? Is there a better version of the product I can get my hands on? This is exactly what Jesus faced every time he did a sign, a wonder, a miracle. The crowds were never satisfied of course; so Jesus and his disciples begin to ponder, what would it take for the crowds to believe? John knows the answer to that and so do we, but he is not ready to tell that part of the story as yet; at best he'll hint at it as he does by linking the story of the feeding to the story of the Last Supper. Therefore he goes into a long and convoluted explanation of what it means that he is the bread of life and the impact that will have on the world when he is gone.

"Bread is the metaphor. Jesus continues to use the image that comes from the "feeding" miracle. Bread (and fish) is what filled their stomachs. They have become so focused, though, on being full that they have lost what really happened. Jesus uses the bread as an extended metaphor for who he is -- someone capable of truly sustaining life."ⁱⁱⁱ And once again he uses God language, *eigo emi*, to have us understand that the way to God, or at least one way, is through him.

Of course this is given the understanding that being closer to God is something we desire. When I was working on my doctoral thesis one of the questions I asked the congregation was what in the liturgy - - the Sunday service - - brings you closer to God, and what makes God seem far away? Most folks said the hymns, the Lord's Prayer, the prayers of the people, the peace, and communion made God seem near (although these were, for some, the same things that made God seem distant). The other more worldly things, like the announcements and the offertory, and interestingly enough, the creed, made God seem far away. We attempted, from that point forward, to say those words and do only those actions that intentionally brought God closer. It was quite a transformative experience!

The question is, for us, do we want a closer experience with God? I'm not sure we even think about it most days. It is, basically, what it is. What if we were intentional about it? Would it make a big difference in our lives?

This personal relationship with God is not as hard to find as we might think, and there is no mysterious formula for getting it. As soon as we become children of God, we receive the Holy Spirit, who will begin to work on our hearts. He is the one who lives in the hearts of believers and never leaves. He counsels us, teaches us truths, and changes our hearts. Without this divine Holy Spirit, we would not have the ability to fight against evil and temptations. But since we do have Him, we begin to produce the fruit that comes from allowing the Spirit to control us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.^{iv} Hence we could say that getting to know God through the Spirit makes us a better person, a being most of us long for. So yes, being intentional about our relationship with God makes a difference. And this is the real nature of the quest of those following Jesus. They want to be made whole, and this goes for the nature of their souls as well. Do they succeed? The gospel tells us that many were healed, so even being in his presence seemed to do the trick. That is a message for us: when two or three are gathered in his name, we are told, he will be in the midst of them. And in that midst, in that closeness we have an opportunity for healing. We do not even have to ask, merely be present with him. What a gift that is!

The people gathered in this morning's story wanted a sign from Jesus that he was who he said he was: the son of God. They were so enthralled with the food, they were missing out on the fact that their Messiah had come. They seemed to be longing instead for one of the "oldies but goodies" signs of lightning and thunder or one of the acts perpetrated by Moses or Elijah: plagues, parting of the water, manna or quail from heaven. Jesus makes one final attempt to clear their eyes and ears: "I am the bread of life," he assures them. Now Jesus points to bread beyond bread, to that gift from God which not only comes to the world through Jesus, but is in fact Jesus himself.^v

What does it mean to be the "bread of life?" This is where the gospel of John goes to its murkiest depths in trying to explain a highly theological understanding of the nature of the Christ. First, by equating himself with bread, Jesus is saying he is essential for life. Second, the life he is referring to is not a physical life but a spiritual one. Third, he is making a claim to be God. Fourth, we are told to come and believe, an assurance that whomever comes to Christ will find all he is looking for. Fifth, the words hunger and thirst remind us that he will fulfill our wish as believers who are righteous before God.^{vi} If being the bread of life encompasses all this, it's no wonder the crowds had a hard time wrapping their heads around it.

To think this is just one of five lessons in *John* that deal with Jesus as the bread that we will be looking at in the weeks to come. After he has said all that we heard and examined today, what could be left? We're admonished as preachers to parse it out, because there is a lot of explaining to do and very little space in which to do it.

I'm reminded of a story of an old man goes to a diner every day for lunch. He always had the soup du jour. One day the manager asks him how he liked his meal. The old man replies, in a thick accent, "Wass goot, but you could give a little more bread."

So the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him four slices of bread.

"How was your meal, sir?" the manager asks. "Wass goot, but you could give a little more bread," comes the reply.

So the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him eight slices of bread. "How was your meal today, sir?" the manager asks. "Wass goot, but you could give a little more bread," comes the reply.

So... the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him a whole loaf of bread with his soup. "How was your meal, sir?" the manager asks, when he comes to pay. "Wass goot, but you could give just a little more bread," comes the reply once again.

The manager is now obsessed with seeing this customer say that he is satisfied with his meal, so he goes to the bakery, and orders a six-foot-long loaf of bread. When the man comes in as usual the next day, the waitress and the manager cut the loaf in half, butter the entire length of each half, and lay it out along the counter, right next to his bowl of soup. The old man sits down, and devours both his bowl of soup, and both halves of the six-foot-long loaf of bread.

The manager now thinks he will get the answer he is looking for, and when the old man comes up to pay for his meal, the manager asks in the usual way: "How was your meal TODAY, sir?"

The old man replies: "It wass goot as usual, but I see you are back to giving only two slices of bread."^{vii}

Like the man in the story, we can easily miss what is being provided for us here. Good and steady mutual trust and a promise of eternal presence with God. That's so much more than bread usually provides us. That's because it is the bread of life, the lamb of God, the bread of heaven, God Himself. That he can be so close to us, it's no wonder the Victorian hymn writers dared to write, "What A Friend we Have in Jesus" and believe it.

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/bread-jokes>

ⁱⁱ *Sundays and Seasons Preaching, Year B, 2018*, p.215

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1405

^{iv} <https://www.gotquestions.org/personal-relationship-with-God.html>

^v https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=367

^{vi} <https://www.gotquestions.org/bread-of-life.html>

^{vii} <http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/bread-jokes>