

The Bread of Life  
A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 8, 2021  
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*Jesus said, "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 Jews 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 Father 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 the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 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." John 6:35, 41-51*

I have a friend whose mother is dying. This week she posted an update on Facebook along with a picture of a dessert she had just made. It was a rhubarb crisp, with a golden brown top and red deliciousness underneath. She shared that her mother had taught her how to make this favorite food, and that she had made it out of the rhubarb growing in her parents' garden. A family recipe that was cherished and served with comfort, memories and love. I suspect the rhubarb crisp was food for her journey, strength for what lies ahead.

Do you have favorite family recipes that bring back memories of loved ones, that give comfort and strength, that feed your soul? My family has specific foods that are always served at family meals. There are the required Christmas cookies, Dad's shrimp and homemade cocktail sauce, Grandmama's rolls and chicken salad, Mama's corn pudding and macaroni and cheese. Family recipes bring back memories and kindle love. They remind us that relationship brings life.

When we gather around the table and share these special foods, it's as if those we have loved are there with us. We are reminded of meals long ago and the stories told and retold, and we are strengthened for the journey we are on today, and we realize we are part of something larger than ourselves.

As we continue reading chapter six in John's gospel, we hear Jesus again refer to the story of how God fed the people of Israel in the wilderness with manna. You can read this story in Exodus, chapter 16. Even though God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, even though God had parted the Red Sea so they could escape from the hand of Pharaoh, they complained. They longed for the good old days when they sat by the fleshpots and ate their fill of bread. This was not really an accurate memory though, because they had been slaves laboring under the harshest conditions to make bricks out of straw. They had little time to make pots of stew and bake bread, but you know how we love to talk about the good old days, even if they were not always so good.

God heard their complaining and when they woke up in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost. It was like coriander seed, and white, and tasted like wafers made with honey. When the Israelites saw it they asked, "What is it?" Manna? That's how you say "what is it" in Hebrew. Manna. It was bread from heaven, that rained down upon them to feed them, to nourish them, to make God's presence known.

But there was one rule about the bread from heaven, the manna. God told them to gather as much as they needed for one day. The people were afraid there might not be enough (you know how we are always afraid there won't be enough), so they gathered extra and tried to save it for later, but the manna rotted and was filled with worms. Give us this day our daily bread. Every day for forty years in the wilderness God gave the people of Israel this bread from heaven.

So, you can see why, when Jesus fed the five thousand by multiplying the two loaves of barley bread, that they would immediately be reminded of manna in the wilderness. Maybe this also explains why they complained about Jesus when he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." Because they knew bread from heaven could only come from God. They also knew Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary. It was all just too much to take in, and so they did what we usually do when we are overwhelmed and are confronted with something that challenges everything we thought we knew. They got defensive, and they complained.

When we are afraid, when we feel threatened, when we experience the loss of someone we love, when the ground falls away from under our feet, when the pandemic will not go away, when political powers threaten the peace and security we once knew, we react much like the people in the wilderness, much like the people Jesus fed on the hillside. We become fearful, we complain, we confront; and sometimes we kill the messenger who brings the truth we are not yet ready to hear.

But Jesus is the bread of life. He is not like the manna that melted and rotted in the wilderness and did not keep the ancestors alive forever. Jesus is the living bread that comes down from heaven so that all who eat of it will not die but will have eternal life. This bread is for the life of the world. This bread satisfies more than physical hunger. Jesus is telling the people, and us, that he is going to give his flesh, his very life, to save us. The living bread will feed us, nourish us, and give us strength for the journey toward the heart of God and life everlasting.

When we gather around the table with loved ones and share our family stories and favorite foods that remind us of our memories and love for one another, we are encouraged and strengthened for our current struggles and for whatever may come.

Life is hard and there is plenty to complain about, but we are not alone on the journey. When we gather together in our faith family, as we mark, learn, and inwardly digest the scriptures, and as we share holy food around God's table, we are fed more than bread, we are filled with the love of God, the presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have another two weeks to knead the dough of this mystery of the Word made flesh. We are being drawn by God into a deeper understanding of the Incarnation, God made flesh, who has come into the world to give us life, life right now and always. Amen.