

2.5.23

I Am the Bread of Life

John 6:35-51

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Do you have a favorite kind of bread? That's a tough question for me to answer because there are so many types of bread I like: Anadama, multi grain, ciabatta, rye, garlic, raisin, Italian, French, nan, pita, banana, apple cranberry. There are lots of wonderful kinds of bread. I think the reason Anadama bread is a favorite of mine is because my mother used to make it when I was a boy and the smell when it came out of the oven and having it warm with homemade strawberry jam was heavenly.

John chapter 6 is known as the Bread of Life discourse because Jesus says three times, “I am the bread of life” (6:11-13, 35). All the “I Am” statements of Jesus that we’re going to talk about for the next eight weeks say something about Jesus and something about those who follow him. The Gospel repeatedly compels us to come to terms with the reality of God in the person of Jesus, & to understand the meaning of our own lives in relation to him.¹

Listen to **John 6:35-51**, “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.** But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will **come to me**, and anyone who **comes to me I will never drive away**; for I have **come down from heaven**, not to do *my own will*, but *the will of him who sent me*. 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*. 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**.”

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*. 45 It is written in the prophets,

¹ Craig Koester, page 15.

‘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.**”

I enjoy eating. Who doesn't? Being able to eat when you're hungry is one of life's most basic and satisfying pleasures. To have no food to eat is one of life's most stressful and trying situations. Most individuals or families have particular meals they enjoy. When you find a restaurant or ice cream place you enjoy, you return repeatedly. The problem many of us have is the food we like to eat is not particularly good for us – it's not healthy, nutritious, or helpful. And I blame God for that. Why couldn't cauliflower taste like the donuts at the Hole-In-One? Why couldn't spinach taste like Cape Cod Potato Chips? Why couldn't bran taste like chocolate mints from Nancy's Candies? If we aren't careful we may crave food that's loaded with enough sugar, caffeine, preservatives, and artificial additives to shut down our arteries like a highway construction project.

We also have an abundance of food that people throughout history and billions in the world today could not imagine. When I was a young boy in our kitchen we had an old white refrigerator with a small freezer on the top. It worked well for years and years. Even when part of the door handle finally broke we kept it. Eventually my parents decided they wanted to get a freezer for the basement so they could store more food. When my parents moved in 1982 into their next house, they bought a new refrigerator to match the kitchen. The new unit had a freezer on the left side with an ice maker. The old refrigerator they had when I was a kid, which was still working, they took with them and put it in the basement, along with the full freezer. When my dad sold the house decades later, both of them were still working and were packed with food, and the unit upstairs was so full you couldn't even see everything that was in it.

The truth is it can be difficult for those of us who have an abundance of food and easy access to pantries, refrigerators, freezers, and huge supermarkets – it can be difficult for us to fully appreciate the impact of Jesus' words, ***"I am the bread of life."*** I love the aroma of bread baking in an oven and the taste of warm fresh bread is one of my favorite things to eat. And I'm not alone. Robert Browning the English poet, (1812-1889) wrote, *"If thou tastest a crust of bread, thou tastest all the stars and all the heavens."* Famous Chef Julia Child asked, *"How can a nation be great if its bread tastes like Kleenex?"* Frank McCourt, wrote in *Angela's Ashes* (1996) *"Oh, God above, if heaven has a taste it must be an egg with butter and salt, and after the egg **is there anything in the world lovelier than fresh warm bread** and a mug of sweet golden tea?"*

When Jesus says, ***"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...."*** He's talking about how he is **like bread**. Obviously, Jesus is not claiming to be a baked mixture of flour and water in the physical sense. Jesus is claiming to be like bread in that **he sustains life**. Jesus is speaking of bread symbolically. Symbolism in John's gospel, especially with the "I Am" sayings of Jesus involves two levels of meaning. **The primary level of meaning tells us something about Jesus – "I am the bread of life."** The secondary level is about discipleship and says something to those who would follow Jesus – ***"Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*** The first part says something about Jesus; the second says something to the believer, the follower, the student.

Jesus is saying he's like bread and those who would trust him should "eat" of him, meaning we should find in Christ's life the source of power and strength for our life. Jesus is absolutely central for any Christian community – whether John's community, or BBC or even a small group. The life of any believer must be understood in relationship to Jesus, who is the center of our faith community.

Have you ever seen one of those food pyramids that portray how much of what type of food you're to eat in a healthy diet? It seems like they're always changing, but one of the groups is whole grains, found in things like good bread.

Lionel Poilâne (6/10/45 – 10/31/02) a French baker and entrepreneur whose commitment to crafting quality bread earned him worldwide renown said, *"Bread deals with living things, **with giving life, with growth**, with the seed, the grain that nurtures. It's not coincidence that we say bread is the staff of life."* It is not a coincidence that Jesus used "Bread" as a symbol of what he provides. For those in the Middle East in Jesus' day, bread comprised a significant part of their diet. Bread was not a luxury item it was a staple, a basic food that sustained life.

Jesus is talking to some of the same people who had participated in the miracle of the five loaves of bread and two fish with which 5,000 people were fed. They came to Jesus looking for more, reminding him how their ancestors were fed manna in the wilderness. Jesus tells them he is **the true bread from heaven**. He has come down to do the will of God and God's will is that everyone who hears Jesus and sees what he's doing will believe that Jesus came from heaven to do the will of God. It sounds kind of circular but that's the way it is.

The second part of I am the bread of life and the verses that follow has to do with **promises that impact the believer in Jesus**. Jesus claims that those who come to him and believe in him will never be hungry or thirsty. He doesn't mean this literally. There are millions of believers in Jesus who are materially poor and physically hungry and thirsty. Those of us who live with so much abundance are called to share what we have with those who have less.

Jesus promises his followers a lot in John 6. He says not only that those who believe in him will never be hungry or thirsty, he also says, he shall not lose a single one given to him by the Father but hold them fast and raise them up on the last day, and give them eternal life. This is an amazing promise. This all sounds good, but what about the old saying, *"If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."* Who could make good on all these promises? If we had a guest preacher at BBC, who said all these things about himself or herself in a worship service, you'd be a little skeptical. If you'd been worshipping at the same place for years and then one day a visiting preacher made these statements, isn't it possible you'd send an email to the office

suggesting we pass on inviting the guest preacher back? People are raising these kinds of questions in John 6:41-42, and they're referred to as "the Jews." *"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'?"*

It should seem odd to differentiate a group as "the Jews" in John 6 because everyone in John 6 is Jewish. Jesus is a Jew. He said these things while he was teaching *in the synagogue* (John 6:59). There are no Christians yet and no Gentiles to be found. So, what's going on? The fourth Gospel reflects one side of a bitter family quarrel. It's important to remember that John's Gospel was written at a time when being kicked out of one's synagogue was the price being paid by those who were Jewish who believed Jesus was the Bread of Life sent by God from heaven to give life to the world. In John's Gospel, the phrase "the Jews" was used sometimes to refer to the Jewish people in general, more often; "the Jews" was used to describe those whose reaction to Jesus' teaching was not one of acceptance or belief.

Understanding the context of the gospel does not excuse or justify the terrible acts of anti-Semitism that have occurred throughout history or currently. Christ would be horrified that people who claim his title or the cross - the symbol of his life-giving sacrifice - would demean, degrade, discriminate against, or kill the descendants of his own people. Jesus came not so that millions would die, but that millions, indeed, even billions would live. His message in John 6 is about his offer of eternal life that begins now and continues even after death.

We shouldn't be too hard on those who didn't believe in Jesus' time because there's a sense in which we can be like the skeptical folks in the scripture. We see blessings and miracles in our lives every day, yet we take them for granted as a right or a privilege. We hear Jesus' claims and promises yet we struggle with committing ourselves totally and trusting him with our lives and needs. Some of us, like them, can't imagine how there can be life after death. Some of us think we have done things so bad, so unforgivable, that Jesus would couldn't possibly love us or receive us – **even though he says if we come to him, which means if we believe in him, he'll never let us go.** We can be like

the folks in the synagogue, wondering how Jesus can be the Bread of Life and how all these things can possibly be true.

Jesus says (6:37), “**Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.**” **The bread of life is for all people, not just for the Jews.** The manna that was given to their ancestors in the wilderness during the Exodus was uniquely for Israel. But that was physical food and everyone who ate it eventually died. Jesus is the bread of life that may be eaten by anyone from any culture, and he says, “*whoever eats of this bread will live forever* (6:51).” One of the things that makes being a Christian different from other approaches to God, religion, or spirituality, is that we don’t have to work or do something to earn or deserve a relationship with God or to receive the blessings God gives. In John 6 people ask Jesus, “***What must we do to perform the works of God?* (6:28).**” All they have to do is believe; they talk about signs and bread in *the past* and miss the miracle *in their midst* – God is giving Jesus the True Bread from heaven. **You can’t work for it; you can’t make it or bake it yourself. The Bread of life comes from God as a gift. The Bread of Heaven comes to give life – not to Israel, not to the church, not to a particular nation or people but to the world – to all who will come to Jesus and believe whoever they may be.** Even to people you may not like, you don’t think deserve it, or you think can’t have it.

It’s been said, You Are What You Eat. That’s true, whatever we eat, at least some of it ends up becoming a part of us. How hungry are you for God? If God had sent Jesus to Asia, then he would have said he was the Rice of Life. If God had sent Jesus to the South Pacific, he would have said he was the Coconut of Life.

God sent Jesus to the Middle East, where the most basic staple food to support poor and rich alike was bread so he said **I am the Bread of Life.**

How hungry are you for the Bread of Life? Feed on Jesus through the scriptures, prayer, worship, the breaking of bread at communion, and the beauty of God’s creation. Feed on Jesus, the Bread of God who gives life to the world because you are what you eat.

Prayer: God of the universe who provides daily bread for the nourishment of our bodies, we thank you for providing Jesus as the Bread of Life to nourish, energize, and sustain our bodies, minds, and spirits. Remind us of the importance of “feeding” on Jesus each day so that our faith may grow stronger, our hope brighter, and our love deeper for Jesus and for all your children. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What’s your favorite kind of bread? Any particular reason?
2. What do you think Jesus means when he says, *“I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*
3. List all the claims Jesus makes in verses 35-40; what does he offer and promise that he will do?
4. What do Jesus’ claims say about the will of the Father?
5. Where does Jesus say he comes from (hint - he tells us five times)? Why is where he comes from important?
6. In verses 41-42, how do the crowds respond to Jesus and what he says? How is the word about a prophet in his hometown played out here (see John 4:44)?
7. What’s the most important thing you will remember for your life and relationship with Jesus from John 6:35-51?