

Bread of Life

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The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat." Exodus 16:2-4,9-16

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 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." John 6:24-35

Two weeks ago, we heard the story known as the feeding of the 5000. We read the account from the Gospel of Mark, but the story is featured in all four New Testament gospels. All four accounts show the divine nature and authority of Jesus. All four accounts demonstrate God's compassionate provision for the needs of all.

The accounts from Matthew, Mark and Luke quickly move on to other things after the story is told. But in the Gospel of John, the feeding of the 5000 becomes an entrée to nearly fifty verses of additional teachings and dialog, none of which are found in any other gospel. This material evokes the primordial Jewish experience of Passover – God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt and God's provision of the sustaining manna throughout forty years in the wilderness. In this gospel and in this gospel only, the account of the feeding of the 5000 begins with a verse that says, "*Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.*" (6:4) The author is giving a lens through which the reader is being asked to understand all that follows. This morning's reading from Exodus tells how the manna came about and prepares us to see the connections to the passage from John.

This long section of teaching in John is also, of course, addressed in part to believers in Christ, following the Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus. In this light, we should also note that this

gospel, and this gospel alone, includes no Last Supper, no Institution of the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, on the night before his Passion and death. Chapter 6 of John has therefore long been mined, contemplated and debated for meaning with regard to the Eucharist.

Many of us, and many fellow believers before us, particularly recognize our own attraction to and nourishment by the Sacrament in the words found at the end of today's reading. Here, we come to the first of the seven or eight 'I am' teachings of Jesus in this gospel. *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

In the original context, the words are addressed to a crowd that had followed Jesus around the lake after they had been miraculously fed. Jesus had already cautioned them: *"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life ..."*

Some of us may be able to see and hear Jesus looking and talking past that original audience, looking at and addressing us. These teachings have a metaphorical, elastic quality that transcends their historical, theological and doctrinal significance. These words beg us to take them personally, to appropriate them for our own lives, our own circumstances, our own hungers. The caution of Jesus may lead some of us to recognize the junk food aspects of so much that we consume, so much that compromises and diminishes us in body, mind or spirit.

The original word used here to commend the bread that *endures* for eternal life is common in the New Testament, but it is overwhelmingly used in the Gospel and in the Epistles of John. Commentator Raymond Brown writes that *"John likes to use [the Greek word] menein to express the permanency of relationship between Father and Son and between Son and Christian."* Illustrative of this is the well-known line from Jesus' farewell discourse in John: *"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."* (15:9) And in today's teaching, the same word is used by Jesus to encourage our diet of the food that endures for eternal life. The notion may cause any of us to turn more wholeheartedly toward that which we now see is more genuinely nourishing us in faith and life.

My own Christian faith is sometimes renewed or refreshed by words from other traditions, and so it was when I recently came across a prayer of Rumi, the 13th century Sufi mystic. In his prayer, he seems to be reckoning with and comparing hungers and desires, both fleeting and lasting:

*I once had a thousand desires,
But in my one desire to know you
all else melted away.
The pure essence of your being
has taken over my heart and soul.
Now there is no second or third,
only the sound of your sweet cry.
Through your grace I have found
a treasure within myself.
I have found the truth of the Unseen world.
I have come upon the eternal ecstasy.
I have gone beyond the ravages of time.
I have become one with you!
Now my heart sings,
"I am the soul of the world."*

Rumi may well have known the teachings of Jesus, including today's passage and the instruction of Jesus to 'work for the bread that endures for eternal life.' Rumi may have had thoughts and questions in response, as have so many Christians for so many generations, as you or I may have had or may now have:

How well do I know my own hungers and appetites?

With what do I fill myself that is only filler: transient, toxic, ultimately unsatisfying?

What, or who, genuinely nourishes my faith, my capacity for love and justice, my perseverance and hope in times of trial?

How am I or how can I be nourished by Jesus, the true bread of life, not only in the Sacrament but elsewhere, by other means, at other times, always?

And how can I share, or how can I *be*, the bread of life for others - others who have never tasted it and who are starving for it, others who once knew it but have despaired of ever tasting it again, anyone who will be so grateful when they are genuinely fed, when I feed them?

Amen.