

“I am the Bread of Life”

Text: John 6:35-40
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The sixth chapter of John deals with the topic of bread. Bread is all over the place. You can just smell it. It's as if we are driving past a Mrs. Baird's bread plant and they have just started a fresh batch. The smell is divine. Go ahead open your Bible and stick your nose right there on chapter six and the bread of life will overcome your senses.

In the first verses of chapter six John tells us that a large crowd was following Jesus. They were compelled to follow him because of the signs that he was doing for the sick. Over 5,000 people were following Jesus and his disciples. There were not any concession stands at the Sea of Galilee so Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, asked the obvious question, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" No problem. As it turned out there was a boy in the crowd who had five barley loaves and two fish, and as things turned out that was more than enough for Jesus to feed the entire crowd. In fact, everyone ate as much as they wanted. When all was said and done there was bread flowing out of twelve large baskets.

So it is no surprise that in our text today Jesus began with the words, "I am the bread of life." Bread was obviously on everyone's mind and how could it not be? They had just witnessed one of Jesus' greatest miracles and bread was a major part of it. "I am the bread of life." This is just one of several "I Am" sayings in the gospel of John. Jesus had a habit of saying, "I Am" in this gospel. It was his way of describing himself. We are going to look at five of these sayings over the next four weeks: I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Sounds pretty good to me. There are a lot of people in this world, you and me included, who are hungry and *thirsty*. Not just in a literal, physical sense, but in a spiritual sense.

The other day Alisha and I were talking about what to have for supper when she asked me, "What do you feel like eating tonight?" I replied, "I feel like eating a ribeye steak with a baked potato and banana pudding for dessert." "Sorry," she said. "You're out of luck. Here are your options - sloppy joes, pork chop, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cereal, and that leftover casserole in the back of the refrigerator." I thought about it for a second and being the decisive person that I am, I asked, "What do you feel like eating?" "It doesn't matter to me, you decide." "Well, I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich yesterday for lunch and I don't really feel like eating that again. The leftover casserole looks a little suspicious. When did we cook that anyway? Pork chops sound good, but I really like sloppy joes. Tell you what, let's flip a coin between sloppy joes and pork chops. Sloppy joes will be heads and pork chops will be tails."

Have you ever found yourself in that same situation? You are hungry but you don't know what you're hungry for. We live in a world that is starving to death and there are people who are searching for something, anything to provide nourishment. Unfortunately, there is a wide array of options at the buffet line of life and many of them are destructive.

Anyone here like to eat Sam's in Fairfield? I went there the other night and usually I get the catfish, but I was feeling adventurous so I ordered the all-you-can eat buffet. I picked up *my* plate and got in line behind all the other gluttonous souls. Talk about choices! As I made *my* way down the line, I noticed the fresh fruit - strawberries, melons, pineapple. Then came the potato salad, coleslaw, carrots, mashed potatoes, chicken fried steak, brisket, fried chicken, fried okra, I could go on and on but some of you are drooling, and we don't have any bibs for the ushers to pass out. Out of all of that food there was no way I could eat everything on the buffet. I could sample bits and pieces, but to have a full meal of every single item would have been impossible. So I had to make a decision. Would I eat the chicken fried steak or the fried chicken. Or what about the brisket? Should I get mashed potatoes or potato salad? Then the most difficult decision of all - banana pudding or apple pie? What to do, what to do?

I was hungry and looking for something to fill my empty stomach. In a spiritual sense we are all hungry, and like the buffet at Sam's, there are a vast array of options in our world from which we can choose to fill the emptiness or at least create an illusion of filling the emptiness. Some of us we choose the option of possessions. Possessions in and of themselves are not bad, but our desire to attain more and more stuff is ultimately destructive, and things can never fill the void.

I read an interesting article the other day about generosity in America. One of the questions was, "In what year did Americans give their highest percentage of income donation to charity?" The choices were: 1933, 1945, 1999, and 2004. I assumed it would be 1945 or 1999. Of course the late 1990's our country experienced great economic growth, especially through the stock market. But 1999 was not the answer. Neither was 1945 after WWII. The year that Americans gave their highest percent of income to charity was 1933. At a time when most Americans were just struggling to put food on the table, they were the most generous. The article also reported the results of a survey conducted recently on generosity among the states in America. The question was, "What state ranked #1 in the generosity index?" In other words, of all the states in America which one do you think is the most generous? The options were: Arkansas, Utah, Rhode Island, and Mississippi. The answer Mississippi with Arkansas coming in second. Two of the poorest states are the most generous. In case you are wondering, Texas came in 12th on the generosity index.

Money and possessions cannot fill the void. Neither can drugs and alcohol. I don't have to tell you how destructive drugs and alcohol are. Some of you have struggled with both of those in your life, and I would say that every family here today has been affected in a negative way by the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

Relationships cannot fill the void. I was visiting with a couple planning to get married. I asked them why they wanted to get married and as is usually the case, they fumbled around with the words trying to come up with a reason to get married. The soon to be bride finally said, "He completes me." She was being sarcastic quoting a line from Tom Cruise in the movie Jerry McGuire. I said, "That's fine and good that you feel that way about your fiancé. But one day he's not going to complete you, so what are you going to do then? Are you going to find someone else to fill the void? What are you going to do when your husband changes? The person you are marrying today is not going to be the person you will wake up next to ten years from now. People change you know."

I get a sick feeling in my stomach every time I hear about a couple splitting up because “she changed” or “he’s just the person I married fifteen years ago.” Of course he’s not the person you married fifteen years ago. He was 25 years-old 15 years ago and you didn’t have children. Now he is 40 years-old and you have three children that run both of you ragged. Adjust to it.

If you and I think we can fill the emptiness with possessions, our work, or relationships then we are out of our minds. So if those kinds of things are not the answer, then what or who is? Jesus. You remember him. He was the one who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” A relationship with Jesus is not a way to avoid problems and hardship in life. In fact, when we get involved with Jesus we find that life is more difficult in some ways. Jesus never promised that it would be all roses for his followers.

I get a kick out of some of these preachers on television. Some of them are a mile wide and an inch deep. They only give part of the story. They smile and promise that if you follow Jesus all your troubles are gone and some even go as far as to promise great wealth. Baloney. I hate to burst your bubble but having a relationship with Jesus does not mean that you will go through life with a permanent smile attached to your face. Do you know anyone like that? Despite the difficulties of being followers of Jesus, we have a peace and sense of meaning to life that no one or no other thing can give us. While it’s not all roses, we have joy and sense of wholeness inside of us that cannot be taken away.

I love the passage in Romans when Paul asked the question, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” The answer of course was no one. Nothing can separate us from Jesus. Not hardship, distress, persecution, life, even death –nothing in all of creation can separate us from Jesus. To a hungry and thirsty people I can’t think of anything better to say than that.

Sadly though, some of us go--through our whole lives thinking that we are not good enough for God to love us. On an intellectual level we understand the story of the gospel and who and what Jesus is for us, but we really don’t believe it for ourselves. We never take it to heart. Over the years the church has not exactly helped in this matter. Instead of going to church and feeling forgiven and free, many of us have walked out of worship services feeling guilty and burdened, asking ourselves, “Why would I want to go experience that every Sunday? I felt bad enough before I went to church, and I sure don’t need some smiley-face preacher pointing his finger at me.”

If you fall in this category then I am glad you are here today. I’m glad you are here because I get to say to you that you are accepted by a gracious, forgiving God. In our text today Jesus said, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.” That may be the most powerful thing he said in the whole passage. Even more powerful than, “I am the bread of life.” “Anyone, anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.”

In the tenth chapter of Mark’s gospel there is a story about people bringing their children to Jesus in order that he might touch them. Jesus’ disciples assumed that Jesus didn’t want to be bothered by the children. He was a busy man you know. He had places to go and people to see. So the disciples did what they thought was right. They spoke sternly to the people bringing the children to Jesus. We don’t know what they said, but chances are it was something like this: “Get these children out of here. Jesus is doing important work. He has people he needs to heal and lives to change. Look, there is a playground over there. Why don’t you buy the kids a happy meal and let them play.”

Jesus overheard what was going on and was indignant. He was furious. He said to his disciples, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child will never enter it."

Then he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Now put yourself in the place of those children. Jesus is taking you up in his arms, he lays his hands upon your head, and blesses you with the words: "I am the bread of life. And you will never be hungry or thirsty again."