

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost B 2024
August 18, 2024
John 6:51-58
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

Today marks the fourth of five Sundays in the Bread of Life series from John 6. Some of you might be wondering: “What else could Pastor Michelle possibly have to say about bread?” Fair question!... I mean, there’s still one more week to go, and there’ve already been moments these past few weeks when I’ve found myself wondering the same thing!... That said, there are some very good reasons why the wise scholars who compiled our three-year Sunday lectionary cycle intentionally set aside this time and space for God’s people to abide in John 6 and the mystery of God revealed through Jesus Christ.

So, this is where I turn to some experts on John’s gospel who are more knowledgeable than I am and can offer some insights to help us better understand Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse. According to these wise scholars, Dr. Karoline Lewis, Dr. Alicia Myers, and Dr. Catrin Williams, it’s important to keep in mind that this entire chapter of John’s gospel is a multi-layered interpretation of the feeding of the 5000.... Since context matters, I want to invite you to think back to Sunday worship three weeks ago, when we heard John’s version of the feeding of the 5000. Do you remember that I mentioned this is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels? It’s true! But you and I need to pay attention to one important difference in how the story is told: In John’s gospel, it’s Jesus himself who feeds the crowds; in Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s accounts, Jesus gives the food to the disciples, and they distribute it to the people sitting on the grassy hillside.... (Hold that thought for a moment; we’ll come back to it!)

The other thing you need to know is that the word “miracle” is never used in John’s gospel. Instead, the works Jesus performs are called “signs” because their purpose is to point people beyond Jesus to God and to the abundant life that is God’s desire for the whole world. So, when Jesus himself feeds the 5000 with bread and fish, it’s a sign that he is the incarnation of God’s abundant life. As I’ve said in some recent sermons, throughout Scripture we see God “feeding” God’s people with whatever they need, and we see God providing for the needs of all creation. In the words of the Psalmist, who praises God’s bounty, “You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.”¹ Because Jesus is the incarnation of our compassionate Provider God, he knows it’s important to take care of people’s physical needs first. Any good teacher can tell you that if your students’ stomachs are rumbling, they won’t be able to focus and learn! That’s why Jesus always heals and feeds people before he tries to teach them the way of God....

In light of this, we can say that Jesus’ tangible satisfaction of the people’s hunger is the first layer of his teaching in John 6. This very practical, compassionate teaching should give you and me and everyone who aspires to follow Jesus much food for thought. For one thing, I can’t help wondering what Jesus would think about recent legislation requiring the Ten

¹ Psalm 145:16.

Commandments to be displayed in some public school classrooms. Honestly, I think Jesus cares a great deal more about children having access to nutritious lunch and good healthcare!... [Amen?!...]

Returning to our gospel narrative from two weeks ago, you may recall that after the people eat their fill of the loaves, many of them want to force Jesus to become their king, so that they can all eat like kings for the rest of their lives!... Jesus, who is well aware of their intention, calls them on it, and he warns them not to let themselves be seduced and sidetracked by perishable creature comforts like bread. He then unveils the second layer of his teaching, saying, “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... [T]he bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”² As the people listen to Jesus, they’re perplexed and curious, but they still seem to think he’s literally talking about some kind of “Wonder Bread”—that is, a miraculous bread that will keep them from ever going hungry again. So, they beg Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always!...” The crowd’s sincere, but misguided request prompts Jesus to take his teaching to the next level. Unveiling the third layer, he tells them plainly, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.... I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me.... This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life....”³

Now, you may recall from last week’s gospel reading that some synagogue leaders in the crowd begin complaining about Jesus because he calls himself “the bread of life that came down from heaven.” They sneer and try to discredit and dismiss Jesus as “that young whippersnapper” from down the street, whose parents they know, but Jesus quickly puts them in their place. He does this by unveiling the fourth layer of teaching, telling his critics in effect, “You don’t ‘get’ who I am because God hasn’t drawn you to believe in me,” Then he repeats his provocative declaration, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” but adds a shockingly cannibalistic twist, “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh....”⁴ In case you didn’t catch it, Jesus just poked the bear! This is evident at the beginning of today’s gospel reading, which picks up as the religious leaders escalate from complaining to arguing. At this point, they refuse to even call their neighbor “Jesus,” instead distancing themselves by calling him “this man” and saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Of course, their protest sets up the unveiling of an even more shocking, fifth layer of teaching, in which Jesus declares, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me....”⁵ Now, I’m pretty sure most of us assume that this passage has something to do with Holy Communion, and we wouldn’t be wrong to think that. After all, Jesus is saying that abundant life—that is a deep abiding relationship with God—requires that his disciples become one with him. So, you and I must take Jesus deep into ourselves, allowing him to nourish and sustain us, while also allowing him to live

² John 6:27, 33.

³ John 6:35, 38, 40.

⁴ See John 6:42, 43, 51.

⁵ John 6:56.

in and through us, as we participate in God's ongoing work of feeding and healing this hungry and broken world. So, there's definitely a connection with Holy Communion!... BUT we also need to keep in mind that Jesus' teaching in John 6 doesn't take place during the Lord's Supper "on the night in which he was betrayed." Instead, it takes place right in the middle of Jesus' earthly ministry, against the backdrop of the feeding of the 5000. What does that tell us? I think one thing it tells us is that the Spirit of God is always and everywhere at work, and so, as followers of Jesus, you and I must always and everywhere be ready to receive the gifts of the Spirit, which show up in many and various ways.

So, I want to circle back once more to something Jesus says in John 6 because his words give me pause—in so many ways! Let's take just a moment to sit with Jesus' saying, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me..."⁶ It's kind of a sobering and rather unsettling explanation for why so many people don't believe, isn't it?... It makes us wonder, "Why are some people drawn to the God revealed through Jesus Christ, while others aren't?" And in a similar vein, "Why do some people believe in the God revealed through Jesus for a time, only to later reject their faith or twist Jesus into someone unrecognizable—someone who better suits their own less-than-godly, human purposes?..." This is tricky territory, friends, so I ask you to bear with me while I try to give you some solid spiritual food to chew on. The first thing I want to say is that it's a great mystery why some are drawn to Christ, while others aren't. Indeed, it always has been! In fact, back in the sixteenth century, the Lutheran Reformers addressed this in one of the church's foundational documents, the Augsburg Confession. Article 5, Paragraph 2 of the confession reads, "The Holy Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God in those who hear the gospel..."⁷ And there you have it, friends! "When and where it pleases God..." As is true in all things, God has absolute freedom when it comes to awakening, nourishing, and sustaining the faith of God's children.... Yet at the very same time, it's also true that God invites everyone to partake of God's gift of abundant life. And because it's an invitation, it's also true that you and I can choose whether to accept or reject God's invitation to enter into an abiding relationship that leads to abundant life.

Now, I'm going to work backwards for a moment and speak first about those who pervert Christianity by turning Jesus into someone unrecognizable—that is, someone who hates all the same people they hate and imposes heavy burdens on vulnerable people. For example, I think about Christian nationalists, who believe in a God who doesn't love all God's children equally and, therefore, in their view, doesn't invite everyone to the table of mercy.... I wonder: How does that view jibe with the Jesus of the gospels—the compassionate Jesus who eats with sinners and tax collectors, who heals everyone without condition, and who even welcomes Judas to the table?! How does Christian nationalism jibe with the Christ who converts Saul, a zealous persecutor of the early church, and transforms him into Paul, a powerful witness for the gospel?⁸ How does it

⁶ John 6:44.

⁷ The Augsburg Confession, Article 5, Paragraph 2.

⁸ See Acts 9:1-9.

jibe with the loving God who sends the Son into the world NOT in order to condemn the world, but “in order that the world might be saved through him?!”⁹

Now, what about those who believe for a time, only to later wander away or reject the faith? Almost every week, I have a conversation with a church member that goes something like this, “Pastor, I raised my kids in the church, but now they don’t go to church any more....” I can hear the grief in people’s voices when they say this, and I have a lot of empathy for them. I also feel a twinge of sadness that the church has lost the gifts these younger generations would bring to our efforts at building community and serving our neighbors.... Here I have to say that I don’t really have an answer for the “why,” and I’m not sure it does much good to dwell on that question. Instead, I choose to hold our younger folks in prayer, while asking a different question, “As people who grew up in the church, how has that shaped their lives? How are they making God’s world a better place by living out Christ’s call to love their neighbor in daily life?...” You see, even though they don’t show up in worship on a regular basis, I’m pretty sure their little mustard seed of faith is making a difference!... Hmm...you know, if I get the chance, I think I’ll invite some of those younger folks to coffee sometime and ask them how their faith makes a difference in their lives. And I hope you’ll do the same!

As I think about all these things, I can hear the voice of a young teen named Hannah echoing across about a dozen years. One morning before worship, Hannah was standing in the narthex at Central Lutheran Church in NE Portland when someone asked her, “What does church mean to you, Hannah?” She paused for a moment, then replied thoughtfully, “I think coming to church makes me a better person....” Friends, I agree with Hannah: I think being part of a community of Christ-centered believers makes me a better person, and I hope you feel the same way. We’re not Christians alone. Together we are the Body of Christ called, gathered, enlightened, nourished, and sent out to share the gift of abundant life revealed through Jesus the Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth....”¹⁰

Thanks be to God for the gift of abundant life that begins here and now and endures for all ages!
Amen.

⁹ Cf. John 3:16-17.

¹⁰ John 1:1, 14.