

Title: The Bread of Life
Text: John 6:48-58
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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The first readers of this Gospel familiar with the Jewish tradition would probably have connected the symbolism of the bread with the word and wisdom of God. There is a connection made in this passage with the manna provided Israel in the desert. John writes: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which people may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”

In Deut. 8:3 Moses says to Israel regarding their desert experience: “God humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” According to Deuteronomy the daily provision of manna in the desert was intended to teach God’s people that they needed the daily provision of God’s word to sustain them as the sons and daughters of God in the world. Just as essential as bread for physical life, so is the word of God for the spiritual life.

God’s word, here, is not specifically sacred Scripture, but it would certainly include the sacred texts. God’s word is God speaking, God communicating, God revealing God’s will. God does this in a number of ways and certainly God speaking through sacred texts was one of the most important ways God revealed his will—but not exclusively. The lesson of the manna taught the people who were in covenant relationship with God to daily listen, hear, and obey the will of God.

Also, in the Hebrew writings there is a connection between bread and the wisdom of God, which is very similar to the concept of the word of God. In Proverbs 9:5 wisdom is personified as saying, “Come, eat my bread, drink of the wine.”

So, in light of this the Christians of John’s Gospel, and for Christians today, Jesus embodies the word and wisdom of God. Jesus reveals God. Jesus conveys God’s will for humanity and for the world.

A dominant theme in the Gospel of John is the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son. In last week’s sermon text we read: “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (5:19-20a). The will of the Father was the air Jesus breathed. The Father’s will was a river of life, and the Son has become a channel for that river to flow to humankind. Through Jesus we enter the flow of

God's life—God's eternal life—which becomes accessible and available to us through Jesus.

Jesus is the living bread and “to eat” this bread is to exercise faith. Throughout this entire discourse in chapter 6 which begins in verse 23 faith is emphasized. When the people ask him about the works of God Jesus says, “The work of God is this: to believe (trust) in the one he has sent.” In v. 35 Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” In v. 40 Jesus says, “For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, I will raise them up at the last day.” In 47 Jesus says, “whoever believes has eternal life.”

So here the symbolism of eating and drinking is symbolism for faith and the symbolism conveys some important insights into what faith is and what faith involves. I have said many times faith is not mere intellectual belief about Christ; it is not adherence to particular beliefs. There's much more to it.

Here the symbolism of faith is graphic and shocking. Listen again to vv. 53-56: “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.” This is symbolism, not cannibalism. The result of this eating and drinking is a mutual abiding—the believer remains/abides in/dwells with Jesus and Jesus remains/abides in/dwells with the believer. It is the language of relationship, friendship, cooperation, and partnership.

How does this work? What does this look like? Are we talking about a life of prayer? Yes and no. Prayer is certainly involved in this sort of relationship, but it's just one aspect of a particular kind of life (eternal life). The kind of life we are talking about is suggested in v. 51 where Jesus says, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Jesus lived his life for the good of others. He gave himself, even unto death, for the good and benefit of others. Not in some general or generic way, but concretely, in the many ways his life touched the down and out, the sick and lonely, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the excluded, the rejected, the poor and desperate. This was how Jesus loved the world. This is how Jesus became an agent and channel of God's love for the world.

Brennan Manning in his book, *The Signature of Jesus* tells about a man named Dominique, who influenced his life as few people ever have. Manning says that one morning in Saint-Remy France seven of them in the community of the Little Brothers of Jesus were seated at a table in an old stone house. They were living an uncloistered, contemplative life

among the poor, with their days devoted to manual labor and their nights wrapped in silence and prayer.

The breakfast table talk grew animated one morning when their discussion turned to their daily employment. The German brother remarked that their wages was substandard. Manning commented that their employers were never seen in their parish church on Sunday morning. The French brother suggested that this showed hypocrisy. The Spanish brother said they were rude and greedy. The tone grew more caustic and they concluded that their bosses were nasty and self-centered cretins who slept all day Sunday and never once lifted their minds and hearts in thanksgiving to God.

Dominique sat at the end of the table. He never said a word throughout this critical denouncement of their bosses. Manning glanced down the table and noticed tears in his eyes. All he said was, “They don’t understand.” (Remember the words of Jesus from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”)

The following year Dominique, a lean, muscular, six-foot two inches, always wearing a navy blue beret, learned at age 54 that he was dying of inoperable cancer. With the community’s permission he moved to a poor neighborhood in Paris and took a job as night watchman at a factory. Returning home every morning at 8:00 A.M. he would go directly to a little park across the street from where he lived and sit on a wooden bench. Hanging around the park were marginal people, drifters, winos, “has-beens,” old men who ogled the girls passing by.

Dominique never criticized, scolded, or reprimanded them. He laughed, told stories, shared his candy, and accepted them just as they were. He gave off a peace, says Manning, “a serene sense of self-possession and a hospitality of heart that caused cynical young men and defeated old men to gravitate toward him like bacon toward eggs.” According to Manning, “His simple witness lay in accepting others as they were without questions and allowing them to make themselves at home in his heart.” He was completely nonjudgmental.

One day when this ragtag group of rejects asked him to talk about himself he gave them a thumbnail description of his life and then he told them how God loved them all and how that Jesus had come for people just like themselves. Later one old-timer said, “The dirty jokes, vulgar language and leering at girls just stopped.”

One morning Dominique failed to appear on his park bench. A few hours later they found him in his cold-water flat, dead—in the obscurity of a Parisian slum. Over seven thousand people from all over Europe gathered to attend his funeral.

He had kept a journal, which was found shortly after his death in the drawer of the nightstand by his bed. His last entry read: “All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me. I can truthfully say that I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If God wants it to, my life will be useful through my word and witness. If God wants it to, my life will bear fruit through my prayers and sacrifices. But the usefulness of my life is God’s concern, not mine. It would be indecent of me to worry about that.”

Manning says that through the life of Dominique he saw the reality of a life lived entirely for God and for others. He writes: “Any spirituality that does not lead from a self-centered to an other-centered mode of existence is bankrupt.”

Our eating and drinking in Holy Communion are symbolic actions, symbolic of Christian faith, symbolic of our participation in the life of Jesus—a life of self-giving for the good of others.

Do we believe that that the way of Jesus—the way of loving kindness and gentleness, the way of self-giving, sacrifice, and service, the way of patience, humility, and surrender, the way of acceptance, compassion, and forgiveness—do we believe that this way of life made visible in Jesus will bring healing and hope to the world? Do we? Do we believe that this is the way that leads to truth and life? If we do then let us eat this bread and drink this cup.

Gracious Lord,

Forgive us our many transgressions as we forgive those who have transgressed against us. Forgive us our many offenses as we forgive those who have offended us. Forgive us for the manifold ways that through our words and deeds we have hurt others as we forgive those who have hurt us. Lead us to feed upon the living Bread who gave his life for the world. Amen.