



Sermon by Synod Minister Seyward Ask

August 11, 2024

John 6:35, 41-51

The Holy Gospel according to St John, the 6th chapter:

³⁵ 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.” ⁴¹ Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² 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?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴ 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, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ 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.”

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Sermon:

If you’ve been to worship the past couple of weeks, you probably are noticing a theme, because we are in the midst of a 5-week long series of Gospel readings from John known as the “bread of life discourse.” That’s right! For five long weeks, we focus on Jesus speaking to various people and comparing himself to bread. Why do we spend five weeks on this topic? How can we make bread interesting for that long? Maybe it’s because this happens in the

summertime, and with vacations and travels and lake time, we're lucky if we see you once during those five weeks.

As for the people who created this schedule of Gospel readings, was that what they were thinking? That church members would probably only be around to hear one or two bread sermons? My guess is no, it's likely not about that. My belief is that this was really important, Jesus referring to himself as not just bread, but the bread of life, and that it might take five weeks to really bring that point home.

Now, bread is not the only thing Jesus has compared himself to. Actually, there are several metaphors Jesus used in order to make the people understand who he really was. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd"; Jesus said, "I am the light of the word"; Jesus said, "I am the true vine"; Jesus said, "I am the way." But more than anything else, Jesus said, "I am bread." He said it enough times to have five separate Gospel readings on it. And why was that? Why was his comparison to bread seemingly more important than being thought of as a shepherd, or a vine, or light?

Well, let's think about this. While everyone might know what a shepherd is, not everyone is a shepherd, and even for the original crowd, probably not everyone knew a shepherd personally or fully understood the role. Not everyone owned or worked in a vineyard. But everyone did eat bread.

Bread in some form or other was a staple in every household, likely eaten at every meal. And for those with the least amount of money or resources, bread was often the only food eaten, because the ingredients were cheap and available. Every culture across the world has some type of bread.

Essentially, bread meets our most basic need: hunger. And Jesus was saying that he was bread. Something we need. Something we can't live without. But unlike the bread that was provided to their ancestors in the wilderness, manna, which was sent from God and did in a

sense come from heaven, a bread that did meet that most basic need of hunger -- unlike that bread, Jesus was saying that he was a different kind of bread, meeting a different kind of need.

In last week's bread discourse, Jesus was telling the crowds about this new type of bread, a bread that would fill them up not only for a day or even for a week, but forever. And the crowds responded to this by saying, "Sir, give us this bread always." It seemed at this point that the crowds were starting to believe Jesus, or at least willing to try this new wonder bread. But the way Jesus responded to their request to give them this bread always was not exactly what they were expecting.

You see, they had just recently witnessed Jesus feed thousands of people with nothing more than a few small loaves of bread and a couple of fish. My guess is they were expecting something more to that style, something along the lines of the manna, a real, physical type of bread that would appear for them to eat throughout their lives. So imagine their surprise, their confusion even, when Jesus responded to their request by saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Ummmmm....I'm sorry, what, Jesus? What does that mean? Aren't you going to perform another little miracle and make some bread appear? I can only imagine the crowd's initial confusion at this answer from Jesus. As his words set in, however, that confusion quickly turned into doubt, and then skepticism, and then anger. How could this man, this ordinary person, be the bread of life? Sure, they had seen him heal the sick and feed thousands with very little, but this...this was crossing some sort of line. "Is this not Jesus," they complained, "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say 'I have come down from heaven'?"

As I mentioned, these people had seen Jesus performing miracles left and right -- healing the sick, curing the blind and lame, feeding the hungry. But now, when Jesus claimed that he himself was the bread of life, and that anyone who believed in him would never hunger again, they started having questions and doubts. They started to complain to one another: "How can

this Jesus guy be bread that came down from heaven? We know his parents. We knew him when we was a child. This is just an ordinary guy from an ordinary background”. Jesus was too common for them, because surely something from God like the bread of life would be a little more special. Jesus did not fit the assumed requirements.

But that’s the thing about us: our limited, human understanding wants to put parameters around God, watering God down into something simple that we can relate to and understand and make sense of. But God is so much bigger than our understanding, and that can be very hard for us to accept at times. The crowds were certainly having a hard time with it. Their understanding of the Messiah was very specific, and Jesus, this common, ordinary man from common, ordinary parents, just didn’t fit the mold.

Comparing himself to bread, to meeting a very basic and very large need, Jesus was making a bold statement. If Jesus is like bread that will fill our stomachs, then we need him; he is essential. And at the same time, comparing himself to bread, and focusing on that more than the shepherd or vine metaphors, that was also a strange choice.

How many times have I rifled through my pantry and fridge that are both literally stuffed full with food items and declare, complain even, that there is nothing to eat in this house? I would be willing to bet that for most all of us, food is not something we think much about as a need. We may look forward to eating at a restaurant, or be excited to try out a new recipe, or repeat an old favorite, and we may even be thankful for what we’re eating. But how often do we really need to think about food as fulfilling a basic need -- that without it we would die? I don’t believe I really ever think about it in that way, because it’s always there, always available.

So with that in mind, what did it really mean to the crowds for Jesus to call himself bread? For most of them, they likely never had to think about where their next meal was coming from, and with bread being such a commonplace staple in their homes, maybe they were really thinking, “So you say you’re bread. So what? Big deal.” Bread was something they didn’t have to think about, didn’t have to rely on. Sure, their ancestors had to trust God each day in the wilderness

to provide manna for them, but things were different. Bread was plentiful. And in our consumer-driven society today, it's even more so. We don't even have to eat bread. We can eat whatever we want.

And I think that is Jesus once more stepping beyond the boundaries we would rather keep him in. To choose something so basic, so trivial, as bread, and compare himself to that, is once more defying our expectations of who the Messiah is. Hunger, true hunger is something we likely barely give a second thought to, and in saying that he is bread, Jesus is saying that he is as necessary as fulfilling that most basic of needs.

That is how necessary Jesus is to us, and also how abundantly Jesus fulfills that need — so much so that we don't even have to think about it, because it is there, fulfilled for us.

Maybe that's why it takes five weeks talking about bread. Because we have to actually become aware of a need that we really never feel, because it is always fulfilled. That is what Jesus is and does for us. He is the bread of life. Amen.