

I am the Bread of Life
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I am the Bread of Life
St. John 6:24-35

This Lenten season I want us to explore the "*I am*" sayings of Jesus. These sayings tell us who Jesus is. Today we survey Jesus' declaration, "*I am the bread of life.*"

St. John 6 reports two miracles, the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the water. Our lesson today takes up where the feeding left off. The crowds look for Jesus, and when they do not find him, they then "*[go] to Capernaum looking for Jesus.*"

In John 6 we recall that Jesus feeds about 5,000-and even has "left-overs" (6:10). The people follow Jesus and go from place to place simply to hear Jesus speak and perform miracles. Later, after the feeding, Jesus walks on the water as he approaches the disciples' boat as they row across "*the sea of Tiberius to Capernaum.*"

The previously fed crowd eventually finds Jesus and asks: "*Rabbi, when did you come here?*" (v. 25). As this crowd-and every crowd-will soon discover, Jesus is not easy to keep up with. In fact his answer confirms that Jesus is onto them: "*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*" (v. 26-27).

When Jesus speaks to the crowd about bread, we might assume they understand the connection between bread for physical survival and bread that nourishes the soul. While it is true that human beings do not live by bread alone, it is also true that we do not live long without it. But spiritual nourishment is now what Jesus offers them.

As is often the case in St. John's Gospel, Jesus makes the theological distinction between the physical and the spiritual--in this case bread. Jesus even uses the illustration of wilderness manna to make his point to his Jewish listeners. It is God who provides this bread, and they ask Jesus to "*give us this bread*" (v. 34).

Bread represents the hospitality of God, and when Jesus tells the crowds that "*I am the bread of life*" in v. 37, Jesus suggests that he is the merciful bread of God's grace. God gives Jesus to sustain us spiritually as authentic bread sustains us physically. If human hospitality is a blessing, think of the value of divine hospitality.

In the early 1960s, I lived in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has existed at the poverty level for decades. A newspaper reports that Ethiopia's unemployment rate sits at 85 percent. Yet my experience amply taught me about the stewardship of hospitality, grace, and welcome-that often was experienced at a table and involved bread.

When a friend and I volunteered at a mission station to do some maintenance work, the African people received the two of us foreigners as royalty. While we actually did little work by American standards we were fed sumptuously! I have never eaten so much food in my life. These blessed people offered us much, yet possessed little. Even with little to share, the gifts of hospitality and welcome were always ready at hand. They emulated the grace God had shown them in their lives. What they had, these African villagers saw as God's gifts. Therefore, they only thought it natural to share their bounty.

As believers, we receive more than grace in Jesus as the bread of life. God also gives us sacred memory through the shared table. The church provides wonderful and compelling connection to our Savior, Jesus Christ-all through sacred memory. Whenever we celebrate Holy Communion, as we did last Sunday, it is an act of both remembrance and anticipation. We experience Communion as anticipation because the holy meal is, in a sense, "bread for the journey."

As we enter the uncharted waters of change and the future, we need the sustenance that only God provides. In the Exodus story, God provides for the people by furnishing a day's worth of manna. *"The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna; until they came to the border of the land of Canaan"* (Exodus 16:35). God did not provide it for two days or a week at a time. Rather, God provided the manna only a day at a time. This reminds the people (and us) that believers are in the hands of providence day by day.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray: *"Give us this day our daily bread"* (St. Matthew 6:11). Thus, we anticipate our future with God as we remember God's past providence. As we remember the important days of our lives, we know that just one day makes all the difference. No matter how much we encourage one another by saying, *"May we never forget,"* we are people, and people do forget. Each time we break bread and recall Jesus' words, *"I am the bread of life,"* we remember-and it is sacred.

We are people of Word and Table because each of us senses, or wants to believe, that somehow in the breaking of bread we will see Jesus. In a sense, each loaf of Communion bread is a miracle loaf because for us this bread represents the miracle of God's love coming into the world and entering our mortal bodies.

This bread we break is Jesus, the bread of life, broken for the world. Why? Because Jesus said: "*I am the bread of life.*" Alleluia. Amen.