

The Bread of Life

a sermon

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Third Reformed Church

November 20, 2022

John 6:25–35

Philippian 4:4–9

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

For a while, I got into baking bread.

I bought a very large bag of bread flour (at a terrific price). With a little bit of that flour, some yeast, water, and a little sugar, I made a sourdough starter, the fermenting engine that drives the production of great bread. I put the starter in the refrigerator, and whenever I wanted to make some more bread, I'd scoop out a bit of the starter, add more flour, water, and other ingredients (whatever I had a hankering for), mix it together, let it rise, bake it, then enjoy it.

It wasn't hard. Just a little bit of work, maybe some creativity, and patience.

Yes, of all the things I learned from bread baking, patience is among the most important. Because if you want to have good poofy, yeasty, risen bread, then you need to give it *time*:

time to rise,
time to rest,
time to rise some more,
time to bake,
time to cool.

For such breads (poofy and yeasty), you could say that much of the work happens by the bread itself. Let the bread do its thing, and you do something else. You could shorten some of these steps, but either your bread won't be as good as it could be, or it would be a different kind of bread.

And that might be okay!

Because another thing I learned in exploring bread baking is how international bread is. Almost every culture has bread. Yet the breads baked the world over are not all the same. They can be very different from each other. But whether they be

pumpnickel or tortillas
or *cong you bing* or naan
or bagels or challa
or hot cross buns,

these all are cousins to each other, all of them types of bread. And they each came to be, no matter how fancy they are now, from the basic need for basic nourishment.

Bread, the world over, is life sustaining food.



They were looking for him ...the crowd was. But Jesus had kind of got up and hid away, taking some time to wander. Even so, he was absent for only a bit. And the crowd eventually found him, way on the other side of the sea. “Rabbi, when did you come here?”

They had been looking for Jesus, because not long before he had fed them. He gave them bread, having taken a few loaves and from it made plenty for thousands. So they tracked Jesus down, as they had been impressed by this miracle and were hoping for more.

Jesus is not so impressed. Or maybe he isn't inclined to find this all that flattering. “Oh, I see what's going on here: you're looking for me only because you had your bellies filled.” There was nothing deeper to this crowd's search for Jesus, only some entertainment, a bit of the “wow” factor, as well as the temporary contentment of a full belly.

So Jesus seeks to go deeper with them. And he tells them this: “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.”

Yes, if they're going to make this effort for bread, following Jesus even to remote locations (“on the other side of the sea”!) just so they can have another taste, then they ought to put that effort into seeking food that will last.

But the crowd doesn't get what he is saying, not yet. (This is often the case in the Gospel of John!) They seem to miss entirely his point, a point contrasting bread that doesn't last with bread that does. And they miss, too, that Jesus himself is the one who will give them such lasting bread, the kind that endures for eternal life.

Instead, they're hung up on the beginning of what Jesus says: “Do not *work* for the food that perishes....”

Ah, *work*. They know what that is! Work's their thing! Work's what they're all about! Work's what they've got to do! Apparently—let's see?—they've got to work even harder,

longer,
faster,
better,
in the right way,
using the right tools and techniques.
(I think we're related!)

That's how they can be content, be filled, with the hunger sated and the yearning abated. That's how they will be fed.

So then, eager for the inside information on holy work, they ask Jesus, “What must we *do to work* the *works* of God?”

But it's not really about working, not really about their own work. It's God's own work, not our “godly work.” So Jesus (I wonder if he was shaking his head in disappointment) tells them “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Well, this catches them short. For they still think that Jesus is saying that believing in him is somehow this godly work that *they're* supposed to do, rather than work that *God* will do.

So, based on that misunderstanding, they ask for some proof.

“What work are *you* going to do, Jesus, to show us that we should believe you? After all, Moses gave manna to our ancestors in the wilderness. What are *you* going to do? What is *your* work, so that we'll know that *we* should take up this work of believing you?”

How fickle people are. Didn't he feed a few thousand of them only the day before?

No matter. Jesus lets that one go. Instead, he takes the example of Moses and runs with it. "Moses? *Moses?* Let me tell you about Moses. It wasn't really Moses who gave you bread from heaven. No, it is God, my Father, who will give you true bread from heaven. Because God's bread is the kind that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Well, now he has their attention, these people who had come looking for more food, driven by hungers they can't name, by thirsts they can't comprehend. Real bread. True bread. Life giving bread. That's what they want. "Yes, Jesus. Give us this bread *all the time!*"

And with that Jesus makes the connection quite plain for them. "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

They will be fed by Jesus. By his very self, his body and blood, they will be fed.



I'm not sure about you. But I still experience hunger. I still find myself thirsty.

I still at times find myself wandering as if in a desert, as if I am a "wandering Aramean," quite far from any Promised Land.

Still, my appetites drive me. Still, my fears distract me.

I still catch myself pining for my next stimulative or sedating consumable product.

And yet Jesus *is* the bread of life. He, and he alone, is the way my soul is really fed.

Do you find that be true for yourself?

Saint Augustine said "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Yes, we are made by God. We are made *for* God. And so it is,

our hearts yearn to be with God,
they desire to rest in God,
they are eager to be fed by God.

But for some reason, we try to make ourselves. We strive to be self-made people. And we restlessly try to make our way to God, all on our own. We take over Christ's work of feeding us by trying to feed ourselves. We busy ourselves with the striving and the doing and the feeding so our hearts may reach their creator and joy. But it doesn't work. These are all

the frantic seeking of a self-blinded seeker,
the directionless journey of a hungry traveler,
the purposeless work of a forgetful laborer.

So *God* has made a way to you and to me, to all us frantic seekers and directionless travelers and forgetful laborers. God has *sent* to you and to me: the bread of life, the enfleshed Word, Jesus truly God and truly human. He is the Way God has made for you, for me, the way for us back to God,

where we can be whole and healed,
where we can be grounded and centered,
where we can receive the nourishment that truly reaches and fills the
emptiness we've carved out within.

Jesus is the bread of life. His majesty centers us and keeps us grounded. His glory and mercy give life shape and texture, depth and purpose, as nothing else has or can. In him we may have a contentment that nothing else could give.



Contentment. We need to pause on that for a moment. Because contentment can be a bad thing, if what you're content about

is corruption or evil,
or injustice or addiction,
or sloth or despair.

Contentment is certainly no virtue if one is

content with cruelty,
content with racism,
content with war,
content with environmental degradation,
content with the suffering of others.

The contentment that comes from being fed and led by Christ, the bread of life, is something quite different.

It's a contentment with your calling as a child of God.
It's a contentment with knowing yourself and others in relation to God.
It's a contentment with obedience to the will of God.

That's the contentment found in Jesus,

who feeds the soul,
who leads the way,
who refreshes the heart,
who does all this by his own suffering, and death,
and resurrection and ascension.

Some of us here, we know this to be true; from direct experience we know it. And we know it also because there are times when we have sought to feed ourselves entirely with other, lesser forms of nourishment:

with work,
or play,
or music,
or friends,
or food,
or drink,

all of which can be good in their own way, proper and limited, but none of which are meant to be the bread of life sustaining the soul.

For some of us, we just know that, when we've done that, choosing other delicacies over Jesus, the bread of life, then we feel it — sooner or later we feel it. There's a hunger:

when we've neglected prayer,
when we've been absent from worship,
when we've not recently taken in scripture,
when we've passed on the opportunity to be fed at Christ's table,
(perhaps telling ourselves
that it's an optional sentimental observance
or an unwelcome waste of time).

And then, maybe we find ourselves yearning for these things. We hunger for them:

prayer,
worship,
immersion in scripture,
the eucharistic feast.

Sure, we can be away from these for a time. And for a time we might feel fine. But then, maybe we start to feel uncentered, confused, lost. If we try to fill up on other things, we may notice that they don't truly reach the hunger.

Only Jesus can do that: the bread of life.

Only he has that richness and depth.

Only he has that power to resist all corruption.

Only he lasts from day to day, in every age, succumbing neither to mold nor decay.

For only he is the very image of God the Father, sent from above to lift us up to God.

Because he is, truly, the bread of life.

My friends, I pray that you seek your nourishment in him.