

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:25–5:2, Psalm 130, John 6:35, 41-51
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At the end of our Bible Study class last Thursday morning, a member apologized to me for getting the group off track. I was confused and said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I’m sorry that I didn’t understand what it meant when Jesus said he was the bread of life.”

My response was, “Are you kidding! That’s exactly what we get together for – to discuss these scripture verses with one another.” I went on to say to him, “Your honesty about what you don’t understand always makes this class more interesting because you make us all think more deeply about the words of the Bible.”

In the class earlier, after someone had read the lesson from John’s gospel, this member said he had been thinking all week about what Jesus said about himself. He said he was a Type A personality and left-brained. He explained that he understood things mostly as either black or white. How could Jesus be bread, therefore? Another member of the group tried to explain and soon everyone was involved, and a most insightful discussion ensued.

Probably more than half of us here today are what we’d call left-brained like the Bible study member. Right-brained people are generally the creative ones with an ability to think more abstractly. John’s gospel especially requires right-brained thinking because John is a master of the metaphor. “I am the bread of life” is the first of eight “I am” statements in John’s gospel including: “I am the gate, I am the light of the world,” and “I am the true vine,” to name a few.

Perhaps the best way to explain today’s metaphor is to think about store-bought or home-baked bread from grain as a basic food product which has sustained humanity for ages. Bread from grain keeps us alive until we die. The question that John’s gospel addresses in part is, “What then keeps us alive after we die?” Here, the answer is the Bread of Life.

If you agree that we have both physical and spiritual components as human beings, then we need food for both. The bread of grain feeds our physical body, and the bread of life feeds our spiritual nature.

These two components are not mutually exclusive, however. Good eating habits, proper exercise, adequate sleep and healthy relationships keep the body fit and contribute to greater spiritual alertness. Spiritual exercises such as prayer, scripture and spiritual reading, charity, sacraments and worship awaken the senses and heighten all of our physical and emotional

capacities. We're better able to believe and trust in those things we cannot see. As I said, we need both kinds of bread to be fully human and as whole as possible.

John's use of the term "eternal life," for which the bread of life is essential, means life infused with the Holy Spirit in this physical life and beyond this life into the afterlife. John would agree with St. Paul that eternal life begins when Jesus, the bread of life, first comes into our lives. Eternal life begins well before we die.

For the majority of us who are left-brained and need straight, unambiguous talk, the verses from Ephesians are more helpful. We understand: "Put away falsehood; speak the truth; don't hold on to anger; give up stealing; share with the needy; stop evil talk and use only words that build the other up; be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving; be imitators of God; love as Christ loved us."

We can understand these plain directives even if we can't and sometimes don't want to follow them. As I said last week, to do these things just in part, we need the bread of life, the Holy Spirit, the power of Jesus, an energy and conviction greater than our own limited human capacity. We need superhuman powers.

At the beginning of John's gospel this morning, we hear Jesus say, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." You and I have the good fortune of almost never having to be literally hungry or thirsty for any prolonged period of time. Our hungers and thirsts are for other things.

Think for a moment about your particular unfulfilled or unsatisfied desires. What do you yearn and long for? (Pause)

More money and things or greater generosity and less money?

A bigger house or a smaller house?

More responsibility or less responsibility?

More friends or a best friend?

A new job or work that is more fulfilling and uses my talents?

A return to health and youthfulness, or maturing wisdom?

Peace in the family or separation from family members?

More leisure or more meaningful activities?

Very few, if any of us, probably have all our various hungers and thirsts quenched, especially if we hunger and thirst for some things we shouldn't.

In John's gospel, Jesus claims to be the sustenance for all our cravings. Can that possibly be true? If we want to find out, we might try "The Jesus, Bread-of-Life Diet." It consists of starting

each day with a healthy breakfast and prayer for Jesus' superhuman help in everything we do. We'll know we are keeping to the diet if all our daily encounters with other people are shaped by: truth telling and being angry occasionally but not for long. Richard Rohr says anger is one emotion like all the others that is a telling and necessary gift from God. There is nothing inherently good or bad about anger unless we use it to harm people or ourselves. He writes in his book of daily meditations for men, "Feel anger, learn what it has to tell you; but don't identify with it, or it will kill you." I understand this to mean we shouldn't dismiss our anger completely until we figure out what inside us is causing it.

So if we are on the Jesus diet, our relationships are characterized by honesty, which includes feeling our emotions and owning them, choosing words that encourage and strengthen others, being kind and forgiving, and looking to the needs and concerns of others as Christ has done for us. If the Jesus diet works, we should have a peace and joy within that is unexplainable because we are acting as God does. At the end of each day, after a hearty dinner, we can stop and look back over our day and say, "Thank you, Lord, for the gift of life and love in your kingdom. I am very full." AMEN.