

John 6:35, 41-51

I am the Bread of Life

March 4, 2018 ~ 3rd Sunday in Lent ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Scripture:

Our scripture lesson begins in the middle of the 6th chapter of John's gospel. This long chapter (71 verses strong) begins with John's telling of the miracle story we call, "the feeding of the 5000," which we considered at last Wednesday's Lenten Supper Service. In John's version of this miracle, Jesus distributes one boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. (Some quip that perhaps the boy was thrilled to give his lunch away, because what boy wants fish for lunch, anyway?) All jokes aside, this single lunch not only filled 5,000 hungry people, as the story goes, but they had "as much as they wanted" and still there was more: 12 baskets of leftovers. Yes, we are entering this week into the mystical world of John's gospel where there is always *more*: more wine, more water, more bread—and more meaning than our minds can possibly contain.

Today's story picks up on the morning after the feeding of the 5,000. He's talking to the people who had been there and eaten their fill, and then went to Capernaum look for him, clamoring for more from this Rabbi named Jesus. When they find him, Jesus is ready to teach them more. He's ready to build on their actual experience of yesterday's lunch—to provide the bridge between what they already knew of God, and what more they were about to learn. Well, some of them. You will see, even Jesus had skeptics in the crowd. And notice how once again, (this happens a lot in John) while Jesus is talking in metaphors, some of his hearers are taking his words literally and missing the point entirely.

Communion Meditation

What does it take to change our minds? What does it take to see something we think we already know and understand, from a new perspective? Back when I was a young adult, I had an experience one morning that made me see myself, my culture, and an activity I enjoy, running, in a whole different light. (Actually the pace would be more accurately described as jogging.) In any case, this experience was a big wake up call I will never forget.

This was the morning that a couple of new friends and I decided to go jogging soon after we had landed halfway around the world from home. We were in the country of Liberia, West Africa, in the small upcountry village of Fahnja, eighty miles northwest of Monrovia. I was in a group of twelve Americans, drawn from across the country, who were there to participate in a cross-cultural exchange program through Operation Crossroads Africa. This was about our second or third morning in Fahnja: a village of thirty families, where women and children went to the river to collect water, where they farmed rice and casaba to feed themselves, and supplemented this diet with occasional small bits of meat from bush animals they would hunt. All of their cooking was done over small, open fires on the ground. We

were there living side-by-side all summer, and during that time building together with them a structure that would house a small medical clinic. But mostly we were there to learn from each other.

Among my group of were thee of us who decided we wanted to “stay in shape” during our ten weeks there and would do so by jogging in the mornings. Great idea, right?

On the first morning of our new fitness plan, we got up just after sunrise, did a few stretches and set off jogging on the one rutted gravel road, leading through the village and onto the next village, Mambo, about four miles out. Way before Mambo, we turned around and headed back. The humidity made the running oppressively hot and sticky already at that early morning hour. Even though our first effort was rather short, we were still proud of ourselves for getting our running going again so far from home.

But just as we got back to the edge of the village, we started to get quizzical looks from the women working in the fields, and from the women carrying water on their heads, with their small daughters carrying smaller jugs of water on their heads as they trudged up the well-beaten path up from the river. Only one man spoke English in the whole village, but we didn’t need English to understand the looks on their faces. All of a sudden it started to dawn on us, how ridiculous jogging just to stay in shape must have looked from their point of view.

Growing food was hard, hard work. The reason for growing food was for the energy it would provide to work and survive. Here every calorie counted, but in the opposite way we usually think. Calories were a precious commodity that sustained the fragile existence made possible by hard, backbreaking work and reasonable weather. What were we thinking, burning off those calories by jogging nowhere we really *needed* to go? We weren’t bringing an urgent message to someone in Mambo. We weren’t carrying water or plowing fields or hunting small bush animals. What were we doing—those crazy Americans. Yes, you guessed it: that was the first and last time we went jogging in the village of Fahnja.

I learned something that day—something about how very small and limited our point of view actually is. I learned something about how narrow our world view really is, no matter how far we’ve traveled or how much we’ve read, or how “open minded” we may think we are. In fact, the more we know, and the more we invest ourselves in a particular system or institution, the more difficult it becomes to revise or rethink or expand our point of view.

In today’s lessons there were some who were ready to expand their point of view, and make the leap from the story of Moses and the manna in the wilderness to Jesus being the bread of life standing before them. They were ready to build that bridge right away, “They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’” (6:34) Some were ready to connect, ready to be filled by the Bread of Heaven—in whatever way their minds and hearts were ready to enter into that metaphor.

But there were others in the same crowd, at the same time, who complained and murmured to themselves, “Is not this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” (6:42a) You know, his dad is that carpenter down in Nazareth, sold me that table a few months back... How can Joseph, the carpenter’s son say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Even though they heard Jesus’ words, even though they may have eaten their fill of those hunks of bread and tossed their crusts in one of those twelve baskets, those hunks of bread were still just bread in their bodies and in their minds. It had not become anything more. That was just bread and this is just the son of Joseph. They were not willing to open themselves just beyond the circle of their limited point of view. They would not allow that experience to expand or revise their understanding of God, themselves, or Jesus—not then anyway.

I’m sure that all of us here today, whether we realize it or not, are hungry deep down for the very Bread of Life. We are hungry to connect, to reconnect with Jesus, the Bread of Heaven. But we also can find that hard to do. We have questions. We harbor doubts. Maybe about whom Jesus really is or was. Or maybe without realizing it, we keep Jesus within the parameters of what we learned as a child; or cling to just one familiar image of Jesus and fend off any others that might reshape or expand that image.

Or maybe we have doubts about ourselves. We may think we’re not worthy. Listen to Jesus’ words: “I am the bread of life, *whoever* comes to me will never be hungry.” There’s our way in. ‘Whoever comes to me.’ That invitation is wide open and unconditional. It’s not a worthiness contest. Picture Jesus at the Last Supper, sharing his body and blood, not with just the ones at the table that “deserved” this holy meal—but with everyone at the table who chose to participate. Everyone, including Judas who would that very night betray Jesus, and everyone including Peter, who would deny even knowing Jesus, not once but three times before the cock would crow.

So yes, Jesus is inviting *all* of us, ready or not, to his table. All that Jesus asks of us is to choose to really come and meet him here. To really come to this table and allow ourselves to be fed the Bread of Life. And here’s the potential waste, the utter, sinful waste of calories at this Table. It’s not about running or fitness instead of plowing a field or fetching water, as it was in Fahnja, Liberia. No. The utter, sinful waste is when we refuse or resist or remain on autopilot even as we take communion, so that we don’t really come to Jesus and partake in the Bread of Life.

Here’s the amazing thing: in this ritual, this Sacrament of Holy Communion, Last Supper, Eucharist – whichever name we call it, we are given the chance to connect at a cellular level with Jesus, the Bread of Life. And when we do, in that moment we are experiencing eternal life, right here on earth. Yes, we’re just eating a very small piece of bread. Literally nothing we’d call a feast. But it is so much more. And through that bread, Jesus gives us a way to have new eyes, a fresh, larger

perspective, another point of view, on whatever we may be facing in our own lives, our family life, or as a church, a nation, a world: Jesus' view, not ours.

This Table is not about us, or our worthiness to receive it. It's about God. It's about Christ dying for us to come to this Table, to "take and eat." Jesus dying for us to truly sink our hearts into this miracle of abundance, where there is more than enough to heal our spirits, to redirect us, and to deploy us back into the world of hurt and pain. Jesus feeds us at this table, so that we might be the hands and feet of Jesus, here and now.

And boy do we need Jesus' hands and feet on the ground, Jesus' eyes of compassion to help us find answers to the questions haunting us: how *will* we stop school shootings, church shooting, movie theater and night club shootings? What is really driving the opioid crisis that has infiltrated every class and culture in our nation? What can we do to respond to the tidal wave of refugees fleeing their countries? How can we help to bring peace to Syria? How can we wake up our nation to the clear and present threat of climate change? And how can we reverse the partisan polarization threatening our government's wellbeing?

Let this meal we are about to share open up our tiny, little worlds, so that we can more fully participate in God's worldview of abundance, generosity, and forgiveness. Let this meal we are about to share extend the aperture of our vision closer to Jesus' view. We don't have to go to West Africa to be given a new perspective. It's right here, waiting. Are you hungry for a fresh perspective this morning? Open your heart and your spirit to receive this gift of Jesus, from Jesus, who is the Bread of Life.