

Bread of Life

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, October 4, 2009 John 6:25-40

Ever wonder about those red, yellow and blue circles on packages of Wonder Bread? Here's the story. Back in 1921, the Taggart Baking Company of Indianapolis was getting ready to roll out a new item – a one-and-a-half pound loaf of soft white bread. Elmer Cline, who worked for the company was given the job of coming up with a catchy name for the new product. It just so happened that in 1921 the Indianapolis Motor Speedway played host to the International Hot Air Balloon Race. Elmer Cline attended and marveled at how these large balloons lifted off and floated through the sky. He was filled with awe and wonder. And that was the inspiration – the new bread would be called Wonder Bread, and the package decorated with circles representing balloons.

For decades, Wonder Bread led the way in sales, and spread across the country. It even became a popular brand in Canada and Mexico. Today, however, Wonder Bread is in trouble. In 2007, a southern California Wonder Bread bakery closed, due to a decline in sales. It turns out people are losing interest in the old standard of soft white bread. They are turning their attention instead to “whole grain,” “premium” and “artisan” loaves.

Forty years ago, bread was something basic, and like tv networks, there were essentially three choices: white, wheat and rye. Today, bread is a big deal and the varieties seem endless. Consider these possibilities: French baguettes, Italian ciabatta and foccacia, Jewish challah, 9 and 12 grain breads, Asiago Cheese bread, Sourdough, Tomato Basil and Sesame Semolina. The list could go on and on. Bread comes in dozens of varieties, and eating artisan bread is extremely hip.

An interest in something more than the standard white bread is what inspired Mike Ferretti to found and operate the Great Harvest Bread Company, which now features over 200 stores across the United States. One of the things Great Harvest is best known for is its free slices. If you want to try a new bread variety, all you have to do is ask. And as Ferretti explains, “We don't give samples. We give amples.” He means they give a whole, hearty slice.

Free bread attracts a crowd. On an average day, you are likely to see a line waiting at a Great Harvest store. In line will be all kinds of folks, from businessmen in suit and tie, to teens with tattoos and piercings, to homeless people, all waiting for their daily slice of delicious bread.

It is a scene that cannot help but remind some of us of the story behind this morning's text. Jesus had miraculously provided bread for a great multitude on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Then he had gone after his disciples and crossed to Capernaum to continue his ministry. But many of those he had fed, once they noticed he was gone, followed him looking for more bread.

To understand why people would go to such an effort just for bread, we have to step back in time. Today, bread is relatively cheap and widely available. In addition, it plays only a minor role in the diet of the typical person. But in Jesus' time, bread was basic. It was a staple. It often made up a majority of the calories that people got from food. Bread was indeed the staff of life. Worries about having enough food, and specifically enough bread, were common and for some nearly constant. Free bread was a very, very big deal.

Maybe too big a deal. Jesus takes this opportunity to clarify what his mission is and what it isn't. He speaks to the crowds that have followed about the bread.

"I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...."

I am the Bread of Life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry." The people had seen the miracle of the multiplied loaves, but they hadn't seen it as a sign. In other words, they only saw a neat trick, an impressive ability displayed. What they should have seen was a sign – a sign pointing to a deeper truth, the truth about who Jesus was: the messiah sent from the Father. Jesus had not come merely to provide bread, but to inspire and challenge people. Jesus came to help people re-evaluate their priorities.

Those of us who belong to a certain generation are likely to remember well the song, "Cat's In the Cradle" by Harry Chapin. The song is really a cautionary tale about misplaced priorities. The singer is a man who is always almost there for his son, but never quite makes it. Again and again, as the boy grows, the son asks, "When are you coming home, Dad?" The answer is always, "I don't know when. But we'll get together, then, son." Well, the years pass, and when the father finally wants to get together, it is too late. When he asks, "When are you coming home son?" he is offered a too-familiar answer: "I don't know when. But we'll get together then, Dad."

Priorities, priorities. No matter what we may tell others or ourselves, our priorities are revealed by the choices we make. In many respects, it comes down to how we spend our time, our money and our energy. Jesus tells the crowds which followed him across the Sea of Galilee that their priorities are all messed up. Sure, bread is important. But it is not the most important thing. Bread may make life possible, but it does not make life worth living. Our priority should be placed on that which does make life worth living.

In John's gospel, what makes life worth living is being connected to God through Jesus Christ. Several chapters later, Jesus describes himself as the vine and believers as the branches. Staying connected is essential. Without that connection, one can only wither and die. Jesus is making the same point here in chapter 6. Jesus is the "true bread come down from heaven," of which the manna of the Old Testament and the loaves which he miraculously produced are merely a sign.

Many of you know that I am interested in heritage varieties of vegetables. I grow some of these traditional varieties every year, and I do think I can tell the difference – they are much more flavorful than most modern hybrids. The other day I got an email offering me the chance to pre-order a heritage turkey for Thanksgiving. There were several testimonial letters raving about the superior flavor of these birds, mostly the Bourbon Red breed which was common 70 years ago but remains rare today. If I order, it will be sent fresh on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, via FedEx overnight. I usually ignore unsolicited email offers, but I'll admit I was tempted this time. I was tempted, that is, until I saw the price. For a small 8 - 10 pound bird they want a whopping \$120! From there it goes up all the way to \$200 for a twenty pounder!

Now, I'm sure it is delicious, and I like the idea of supporting the effort to preserve rare breeds. But here's what I realize – no matter how delicious that turkey is, I'm still going to get hungry again the next day. Okay, so maybe I'll have left-overs. Still, sooner or later, the turkey is gone, as is my \$120, and I'm hungry again.

The same is true of bread. You can pay \$15 or \$20 for a fine "artisanal" loaf of ciabatta or Sesame Semolina. Or you can stand in line at a Great Harvest store and get a slice for free. It will be delicious, but then it will be gone. And you will get hungry again. That's just how it is with ordinary human hunger.

Jesus would rather we focus on something more, our deeper, spiritual

hunger. Jesus wants us to concentrate on our hunger for meaning, for a sense of purpose and belonging. And Jesus offers himself as the “bread” that will feed that hunger, once and for all. If we look at Jesus and learn from Jesus and connect to God through Jesus, we will understand everything we need to understand about who God is and why we’re here and what we are supposed to be doing.

Jesus did care and still does care about physical hunger. He fed the hungry and calls on us to do the same. But Jesus doesn’t want us to confuse the “bread” that solves the problem of hunger temporarily with the “bread” that gives eternal life. The bread of this world may give you the strength to get out of bed in the morning, but the bread of heaven gives you a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Tonight, in our Love Feast, we will break actual bread to remind us of the true bread, our Lord Jesus Christ. We will gather to worship, fellowship and be reminded of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. We will be reminded that life is more than food, that there are things worth sacrificing for, and that we have a calling to show the way and to share more than just food with others. We have the gospel, the good news of God’s love and forgiveness, the good news that God is at work to feed, heal and redeem the whole world, and being part of that work is the best reason of all to wake up every morning.

Amen.