

Bread of Life

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, February 28, 2010, John 6:25-35

Along with lots of serious work and some major advances, there is a lot of what I like to call “silly science” out there. People study all sorts of strange things, and then publish the results, which often turn out to be not much more than mildly interesting. Take, for instance, Alan Hirsch, who is the neurological director of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago. He had 800 volunteers take personality tests and then asked them to name their favorite snacks. The results, reported in the journal *Alternative Medicine* (May 2007), were surprising: people who share a personality type choose the same snack 95 percent of the time.

Are you crazy for cheese curls? Passionate about popcorn? Nuts about nuts? What you snack on says a lot about who you are. Lovers of cheese curls have a high sense of morals and ethics. People with a passion for popcorn are the take-charge type. Folks who are nutty for nuts are even-tempered, easy to get along with and highly empathetic. Are you a fan of tortilla chips? You’re a perfectionist. You’re successful and ambitious, and you like to plan ahead. You have a strong sense of social responsibility and abhor injustice. Do you prefer pretzels? You’re the life of the party. You love novelty and can quickly become bored with routine. You tend to start new projects before completing existing ones.

While this link might sound like a stretch, Hirsch says it makes perfect sense biologically. “Food preferences reside in the olfactory lobe,” he says, “the same part of the brain where the personality resides.” You are what you munch.

Well, while you chew on that information, let’s take a closer look at our text from this morning, which concerns folks who were big on bread. As the story begins, a large crowd is following him because of the signs that he’s doing for the sick. He feeds this crowd of 5,000 with five barley loaves and two fish, and then he withdraws to a mountain because “they were about to come and take him by force to make him king.” That evening, the disciples set out for the town of Capernaum by boat, and Jesus catches up with them by walking on the water. The next day, the crowd follows him to Capernaum, and Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

Notice that the people in the crowd don’t deny it. In fact, they are pretty persistent. From a certain point of view, it is almost funny. As Jesus tries to make them understand what he is really all about, they just keep coming back to bread. They ask him to prove that he is sent by God, and they have a suggestion of how he can do it: “Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” Hint, hint.

Then, when Jesus again tries to clarify the point by saying, “the bread of Heaven is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” they reply by saying, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Now, to be fair, these are people living in a time and place where an adequate supply of food was never guaranteed. Famines and food shortages were common. The possibility of achieving perpetual food security was not something to be taken lightly.

And Jesus did not take it lightly. We do not read this text accurately if we conclude that Jesus was saying food is not important. Food is important to Jesus. That's why Jesus fed multitudes and why Jesus encourages his followers to recognize feeding the hungry as part of their mission.

Jesus understands that bread "meaning food more generally" is important, even essential, for human flourishing. But he also recognizes that alone, it is not enough. Remember his temptation in the wilderness, when he was urged to turn stones into bread? He replied, "No one lives by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

In philosophy and ethics, there is an expression used to describe this kind of situation. We speak of things that are "necessary but not sufficient." Ordinary daily bread is necessary but not sufficient for the kind of life God calls us to live. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for daily bread, but that wasn't the whole prayer: "Our Father, give us this day our daily bread. Amen." Daily bread is not enough. That was the point Jesus was trying to get across. But the people in the crowd just weren't prepared to swallow what Jesus was dishing out.

Twenty years ago, when our oldest daughter Naomi was about three, we were having a hard time diversifying her diet. She had a handful of things she would eat, and that was it. I still remember one meal when her mother decided that Naomi was going to eat at least one bite of hamburger. After lots of pleading and a few threats, Naomi finally allowed Kathy to put a small bite in her mouth. Naomi sat there for a minute or so with a frown, until Kathy said, "Let me see." Naomi opened her mouth and there was the piece of hamburger, just the way it went in.

So then Kathy made her chew. She would chew once and stop. So Kathy would say, "Chew some more." Naomi would chew once more and stop. This went on for several minutes, until the hamburger was just mush, but Naomi would not swallow it. Kathy said, "Well, you're just going to sit there until you swallow it," and Naomi sat there, with a mouth full of hamburger mush for ten minutes, twenty minutes, a half hour. I have to tell you, it was just amazing to watch "these two strong-willed people going head-to-head. It was like a battle of the Titans.

Some people are like that when it comes to what Jesus asks us to swallow. He says, "I am the bread of life," meaning that living the way Jesus lived and taught us to live is how we get what we need to live the truly abundant life God wants us to live. But for many, the things Jesus asks of us are hard to swallow.

We gag on his hard sayings and tough teachings. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Jesus can stick in our throats, no doubt about it. He would be so much easier to digest if he said, "Love your friends, do good to those who like you, bless those who compliment you, pray for those who help you."

But that's the diet we're already on, and it doesn't have the kind of "nutrition" we need to grow spiritually.

There is a message here for us, especially in this Lenten season, a time for reflection. Think of all the time, energy and other resources we put into pursuing those things that are like daily bread, food, shelter, good health. Those aren't bad things " they are good things. They are important. They are necessary, but not sufficient. By themselves, they are not enough, at least, not enough to sustain the kind of life we were created and redeemed to live.

So the question is, what are we doing to get what we need in addition to these forms of "daily bread?" How are we partaking also of the Bread of Life? How are we allowing the grace, forgiveness and wisdom of Jesus to fill us and shape the people we are becoming?

It's always a challenge to improve eating habits. Ask anyone who has tried to shed weight or lower cholesterol intake, or the diabetic who has had to give up sweets. One thing that clearly does help is social support, and that is one of the reasons the church exists " to support its members as they try to change, and as they seek to grow spiritually. But while others can help us, they can't do it for us. We each need to take the first step, or maybe I should say, the first bite.?

Like eating, nourishing ourselves on the teachings of Jesus is not something that is once and done. We eat every day, we need to seek spiritual nourishment every day, as we pray, reflect, read scripture and live out the lessons we are learning. God provides daily bread, and God has provided the bread of life. Together, they are everything necessary and sufficient. They are everything we need.

Amen.