

## **Eating the Word**

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

13th Sunday after Pentecost - August 22, 2021

Text: John 6:56-71

At the start of our service, some reminders:

We worship on land of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Dakota people.

Also, in case you've missed it, the single truth we've been driving at this past month is this:

Jesus is the bread of life. Taste and see that God is good. Eat this living bread and live forever; and become bread for the world. Today I invite you to think of what we are doing not as a worship service but as a meal we enjoy together. It's fitting to be outside: to savor the sunshine, absorb the colors, the ripeness. Taste the breeze; drink in the sweetness of the music; feast on the faces around you - we are one bread, one body.

Because this is a meal, we start with a table blessing by John O'Donohue:

*As we begin this meal with grace,*

*Let us become aware of the memory carried inside the feast before us:*

*The quiver of the seed awakening in the earth,*

*Unfolding in a trust of roots and slender stems of growth,*

*On its voyage toward harvest, the kiss of rain and surge of sun;*

*The innocence of animal soul that never spoke a word,*

*Nourished by the earth to become today our food;*

*The work of all the strangers whose hands prepared it,*

*The privilege of wealth and health that enables us to feast and celebrate. **Amen***

GOSPEL READING John 6:56-71

*These verses conclude Jesus' words on the Bread of Life. They signify a watershed moment in Jesus' ministry, because many who found the teaching too difficult "turned back" from following him. What do we do when confronted with a dilemma like theirs?*

Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It

is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

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Again, I invite you to imagine that we share a banquet, feasting on the living Word of God, grazing on Jesus himself, who promised those who believed and did not turn away that he himself was the bread of life.

Think of bread. Close your eyes and catch in your nostrils and your mouth the aroma, taste and texture of the best breads you ever ate. For me, there are many: my grandmother’s plain white bread. Something about her old, worn hands folded in a flavor I’ve never found since. Or the dense whole-grain loaves of Spain called *pan integral*, “integrated” bread. Or the crusty French loaves offered as a cheap workers’ breakfast at makeshift outdoor stands in Senegal, chewy foot-long chunks served with hot Nescafe thick with sweetened condensed milk. Or the watermelon-sized loaves kneaded in long wooden troughs and baked a dozen at a time in wood-fired ovens in Greece. Or the raised-dough rounds roasted on the vertical walls of sunken-pit ovens in India. Or my sister’s famous handmade bread at the ARC retreat center, baked fresh for every meal. Or Margie’s hot gluten-free biscuits. All bread. All good.

What memory of bread most satisfies you? What is the staff of your life? For some, of course, it’s not bread in loaves and slices, it’s bowls of steaming rice, or balls of sticky white *fufu* pounded from cassava root, or stacks of tortillas, made of lime-soaked corn ground fine on stone *metates* and patted flat to cook quickly.

Bread as we encounter it in John chapter 6 is a universal word for *the* foundational food, food so basic you can’t imagine life without it. Food that comforts. Food that tastes like home. What Jesus was getting at is that the living God is as necessary to human life as bread in the belly. Taste and see, he told them. But that idea was too weird for some people, and they turned aside from following. For those who remained: Jesus became their daily strength, their comfort through sickness and distress, and hope and home forever.

Of all the news from Afghanistan that's flooded the media this past week, one morsel grabbed me and stayed with me. The US interviewer spoke with a colleague in Kabul just hours after the city had fallen to the Taliban. "What's it like on the streets?" he asked. The answer: "People aren't moving around much; everything is closed -- except the bakeries. The bakeries stayed open so people can get bread. They can still eat." For some reason this seemed incredibly moving to me: when your whole world is turned upside-down and nothing is certain, some risk their lives to make bread. To keep you alive. To give you comfort and hope. To do what God wants to do for you, if you can swallow the weirdness of the teaching.

But there's more. If it's true that you are what you eat, when you feed on the living Word, you become bread for the world. Food for the starving. Comfort for the sick and stressed. Home for the unhoused, the refugee, and the stranger.

Here's the deal, though. It's not that hard to become bread. But it may not always be comfortable. It wasn't a joyride for Jesus: he was soaked in the caustic juices of persecution and hatred. He was ground down between the disbelief of his own religious community and the suspicions of the empire. He was betrayed by his own disappointed disciple. He died because people couldn't tolerate the kind of life that feeds the hungry instead of feeding *on* them.

How many changes does grain go through to become bread? Seeds burst and grow, their stems are scythed down, their kernels threshed bare. They are ground to dust, pummeled into a mass, fermented with yeast, and exposed to fiery heat, before becoming our life, our health. All that beating and knocking about is what makes the texture, the fragrance, the taste of home for us. Life does that to us, too - the more manure, the richer the grain. The longer the kneading, the stronger the rising. The more varied the flour, the deeper the flavor. The many become one; diversity fortifies the whole; those who survive suffering lend strength and structure to the loaf, the better to feed others.

If this is too fanciful a flight of imagination, or too poetic a stretch to be useful to you, I apologize. Take what you like and leave the rest. But let me remind you that it originates with Jesus' words, not with me. The truth of bread as life, and God as life-giver, is baked into Scripture. God living in you is as necessary as bread in your belly or air in your lungs.

So is Jesus' three-times repeated command to his disciples: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. This is a spiritual task but also a material one, and a privilege as well as a responsibility. Come home. Eat your fill. Be satisfied. Be comforted. Become what you eat. And then offer your strength and your life to a world that is dying to be fed. Amen. Thanks be to God.

## Prayers

In the midst of the world's woes, God, we long for simple comfort: love and friendship, food that satisfies, hope for the future our children and grandchildren will inhabit. Good health, an end to rancour and division. Help us to be part of the healing, not part of the hurting.

May we remember that to feed others we must first be fed by you. Help us to receive the life and love you give so freely, grace upon grace.

Our prayers reach out to those who suffer from violence, to women and children threatened by extreme politics, to those who have lost home and safety to wildfires, to those struggling with sickness of all sorts, and those heroically combatting these ills.

Our prayers reach inward to those in our close circles facing crises of health or life, and to all who seek healing. May they find it in you. We ask in the name of Jesus, our living bread, who taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven...."

### **Grace after a meal (John O'Donohue)**

*We end this meal with grace  
for the joy and nourishment of food,  
the slowed time away from the world  
to come into presence with each other  
and sense the subtle lives behind our faces,  
the different colors of our voices,  
the edges of hungers we keep private,  
the circle of love that unites us.  
We pray the wise spirit who keeps us  
to change the structures that make others hunger  
and that after such grace we might now go forth  
and impart dignity wherever we partake. **Amen***