

“Living Bread”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 13, 2022

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 58:3-9a

Rev. John Wahl

John 6:35-40, 51

It must have been an amazing sight: thousands gathered, listening and learning, and then – all of a sudden – hungry. It must have been amazing to hear Jesus asking the disciples to take care of them, to feed them, when all they could come up with was a little boy with fives loaves and two fish. It must have been amazing to see Jesus take the bread and give thanks and begin to feed those who were gathered there.

And it must have been amazing when the people who had their fill wanted to make Jesus their king. Jesus had provided for them beyond their belief. But, as it often happens in the Gospel of John, not everything is what it seems. What are the people looking for? What are they really hungry for?

It is not uncommon to confuse the symptom for the problem, the want for the need. Those that were fed that day come looking for Jesus to give them more; Jesus then faces them with the reality of his identity, with the opportunity to receive a different kind of life, if they choose to participate in it. It turns out that Jesus, the word made flesh, is more than a miracle worker; he is not just the son of Joseph, the carpenter, but is the one that reveals the father; he is the one who connects us and makes us participants in the divine, eternal life.¹

At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus had taken those five loaves of bread and multiplied them so that they would feed five-thousand people, or more. But that’s not all. The abundance is so amazing that even after all are fed, his disciples gather up twelve baskets of leftover bread. This over-the-top provision is a recurring theme (remember the 180 gallons of wine at the wedding) of John who says that Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. The people needed bread to live another day. Jesus gave them bread and then used that

¹ Juan Carlos Huertas, “Sharing in the Life of Jesus” from *Day1.org*

connection to reveal something about himself as the one who can nourish them not once, but forever.²

Those of us who claim Christ as our Lord find ourselves being fed by Christ's presence, and it is in that food that we become participants in the divine, eternal life. God is reaching out to us, providing a way for grace, opening the door for the holy to live among us; again and again.

Eternal life is the certainty of provision, the source of what sustains life that you know and trust, that was witnessed in the miraculous and abundant feeding of the five-thousand; at the same time, it is a promise carried into the future that Jesus prepares for all believers.³

In the living bread that comes down from heaven, we learn to love, because God first loved us. God speaks to us through Christ who is the literal/physical bread of life, but also the mystical/spiritual revelation of love. On this weekend before Valentine's Day, it may be worth our time to think about the ways love is revealed to us and among us.

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman lists these: quality of time, acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, and receiving gifts. Love can be expressed in these multiple ways but notice that the final language of love – the receiving of gifts – is passive, not active. Pastor Nathan Williams relates this final love language to the miraculous feeding of the five-thousand in the gospels, where love is revealed in the abundant provision of bread. It is not purchased or produced, it is simply blessed and given. And as a gift received, the bread becomes a material and mystical symbol of love.⁴

The receiving of gifts is one of the love languages that many of us have been missing in the disruption and dislocation of this ongoing pandemic. Because we each have been – to some degree – disconnected, the opportunities for this holy exchange of giving and taking has become diminished. In the church – as in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces – our sharing has been limited; with less fellowship, tighter circles, fewer authentic and spontaneous encounters. The exchange of material and mystical gifts has slowed, leaving many of us isolated, estranged and depleted.

² Jamie Clark-Soles from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Karoline Lewis, *John* from Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary

⁴ Nathan Williams from *Narrative Lectionary*, "A Funny Thing"

The same could be said about the rest of the love languages: we have been missing the gifts of quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, and physical touch. I visited several Habitat for Humanity project sites last week where the maximum number on work teams has been reduced from eight to four; not only slowing the progress toward completion but also the opportunities for fellowship and service. We know that overall rates of depression, addiction, and other mental health issues have skyrocketed over the past two years. We miss being able to share hugs and handshakes with friends and fellow worshippers.

When we contemplated the creation of our free community meals in the fall of 2020, we wondered, *what would it look like for us to be a church that fed people? How would we safely and effectively feed others? And what about these offerings would provide for the presence of God and the divine, eternal life for living now?*

As much as we would have liked to do community meals in the ways we were used to; sitting together at tables in our Fellowship Hall, gathering to eat and lingering for conversation with each other, we knew this was not, for this time, a responsible option. Still, in the sharing of this different type of meals, we found an opportunity to make sure that the resources we offer, the table that we spread, the door that we open becomes a part of God's activity in the world.

People, everyday people, hungry people, needy people, people looking for relationship, people in desperate need of one another can experience – in the sharing of bread, in the receiving of gifts – the abundance of the living bread that Jesus offers. Maybe if we spent more time and attention to becoming a feeding people, a community of the *bread of life*; and if we took more seriously the reality of God's presence in our meals, then we could spend less time and attention in those things that separate us, that exclude others, that close our doors, that question the innate image of God in others.

The act of feeding assumes that we are hungry, that we are in need of sustenance. The Christian life challenges us to recognize our dependence and interdependence. In eating, we are acknowledging our own dependence on God, no longer relying on signs and wonders, simply looking to be given daily bread; instead recognizing our own true needs.

God has called us to care for one another. If God could come to reach us, to become flesh and blood and live among us, then we too can leave the comforts of life. We can arise from our pews, from our comfortable place of worship, and walk out of our doors to reach out to others.

Part of the challenge is our recognition that there are many around us that go each day, every day, without the sustenance that is needed. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” he is claiming that physical and spiritual hungers are intertwined: one cannot be pulled apart from the other, we can’t talk about one without the other.⁵ If all that we speak of or pay attention to is the spiritual, then we ignore some of the actual needs of actual people.

The church is at its core a community of people who hunger, called to gather around a table, whose identity is rooted in what it means to be nourished and sustained by the presence of Christ each and every time we come together.

There are, in our troubled world and in these troubling times, many who are looking, many who are hungry. As we listen and learn, we come to better understand the physical and spiritual hunger that is all around us. People are longing to experience the languages of love: quality of time, acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, and the receiving of gifts. May we become the body that feeds them, that proclaims the identity of the living bread to this broken and hungry world. Amen.

⁵ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*.