

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
August 5, 2018  
Title: True Nourishment  
Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16  
John 6:24:35

“Together we serve, united by love, inviting God’s world to the glorious feast.”<sup>i</sup> Last week we talked about the amazing feast that occurred when Jesus fed a crowd in excess of 5,000 people, beginning with only 5 small loaves and 2 small fish that a boy offered. At the end of the meal, 12 baskets were filled with the leftover bread.

Today, we gather for a different feast, the feast that we call Holy Communion, or The Lord’s Supper. At this feast we will receive a small piece of bread which we will dip into a cup of grape juice. It may not seem like much of a feast if we compare it with what we heard about last week, but it is the feast of true nourishment.

After the miraculous meal, the crowd tried to make Jesus become their king, but he went away from them up into the mountain. During the night, the disciples set off in their boat to cross the lake.

In the morning, when the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were anywhere to be seen, some of them got into boats and went across the sea to Capernaum to look for Jesus. Jesus knew that they had come looking for him only because they had received enough food to fully satisfy them.

John’s gospel now begins a rather lengthy section in which Jesus responds to this and says that he is the Bread of Life. In Jesus’ ministry there is a lot of sharing of bread and feeding people. Someone I read this week compared it to a “gigantic floating potluck”<sup>ii</sup> The first miracle that the gospels report is Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding. Later there

are numerous parables about food, Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, and feeds the crowds. On the night that Jesus was betrayed and arrested, he shared a meal with his disciples that we now call “The Last Supper”.

Following his resurrection, he was recognized by Cleopas and his companion in Emmaus, when Jesus broke bread. Later he appeared to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias as his disciples finished a frustrating night of fishing and catching nothing. He told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat and they caught so many fish that their nets started to break. After that in a dialogue with Peter, he asked Peter three times if Peter loved him, and three times told Peter to feed Jesus’ lambs and sheep.

All of this feeding people and talking about food, helps to lay the ground for Jesus claim in today’s gospel that he is the bread of life and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty. We know that Jesus is not saying that we will never be physically hungry or thirsty. Our bodies are designed to want and need food and drink so that our bodies may not only live but also thrive.

We know that the kind of food and drink that we put into our bodies makes a difference in how our body responds. We know about nutritious food and junk food and many of us spend our entire life trying to balance these in healthy ways.

When Jesus talks about being the bread of life, he is making a claim that he is as important to the survival and flourishing of our lives as physical food and drink are for our physical bodies.

This concept is going to be hard for his followers to understand, and we see the beginning of that in today’s gospel, where the crowd is still

trying to figure out who Jesus is. They ask him a lot of questions: When did you come here? What must we do to perform the works of God? What sign are you going to give us so that we may see and believe you? What work are you performing?

Remember that these are hardworking men and women, struggling to put enough food on the table each day just to keep them and their children alive. They are people who seek to be faithful in following the many religious laws that they have been taught. They are people who are living under oppression and are waiting, hoping, and praying for the Messiah, who they believe will rescue them from Rome and make their lives better.

Jesus never tells someone that they shouldn't question. He knows that without questions there are no answers. He knows that questions provide teachable moments and offer him the opportunity to make things clear.

He explains that they should seek the food that endures for eternity, the food that he will give them. The work that they should do – the work of God is for them to believe in him, trust in Jesus.

The miracle of feeding the crowd points ahead to this conversation. In the other gospels, we hear that the disciples distributed the food to the crowd, but in John's gospel, it sounds as if Jesus is the one who gives the food. This points ahead to the Last Supper where Jesus explains that the bread he breaks is just like his body that will be broken for them. It is in that meal that Jesus tells them, to "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Even at that time, they did not understand, just as they do not understand now, when he tells them that he is the "bread of life".

He is promising a spiritual sustenance to those who believe in him so that they will never hunger or thirst for truth. Jesus used the language of daily physical need to remind us how integral our relationship with God is. Just as bread and water sustain us physically, Jesus – the bread of life – offers divine sustenance, nourishment for our souls.

Paul builds upon this in his letter to the Ephesians, begging us to lead a life that is worthy of our calling to be followers of Jesus. For Christians who were just getting used to their new relationship with God and just beginning to understand this new covenant, Paul reminds them, and us, that freedom goes hand in hand with our responsibility in the Body of Christ. You can't have one without the other.

“As Christians, our journey toward freedom begins and ends with Christ, whose body becomes the anchor that grounds our lives and prevents us from being swept away by so many winds. When we accept our freedom and joyfully build Christ's body, every hour and every day, we too become sources of strength and stability for others – and bread for the life of the world.”<sup>iii</sup>

When we come to the table today, we come to the one who is the bread of life. All we need to do is to come to him and say, with those in the crowd, “Sir give us this bread always.” Daily, we seek the true nourishment that only Christ can give us.

When we come to the Lord's table, we come to receive the “bread of life, the cup of salvation. We come to receive what only Christ can give to us. What we receive in communion is food for the spirit. For the weary it is rest for the soul. For the burdened it is strength for another day. For the lonely it is a community of faith. For the angry or hurt it is a vision of at least part of the world made right. For the sick and those confronted by the

reality of death, it is an eternal healing. For the one who comes in faith it is the very presence of Christ.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Damon, Donald Charles. "Together We Serve" vs. 1, TFWS #2175

<sup>ii</sup> Kellermann, Bill Wylie. "A Confusion Before the Cross" in Sojourner's "Preaching the Word"

<sup>iii</sup> Bruzzese, Michaela "Journey Toward Freedom" in Sojourner's "Preaching the Word"

<sup>iv</sup> This paragraph comes from my "Means of Grace" talk for Emmaus.