The Bread of Life
John 6:25, 35-41

The Gospel of John is very different from any of the other three Gospels. In John you never really know what's what. Water is not really water. Wind is more that wind. Bread is not only bread, it is life. Jesus loves to use double-speak in the Gospel of John, talk that means more than what you first suppose. Today's reading from John is a great example of what I mean. Jesus is talking about bread, but he's talking about more than bread.

John Chapter 6 begins with two miracles: the miracle of Jesus feeding 5000 men with 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish: and the second miracle, Jesus walking on water. These miracles are followed by a long discourse about bread. Here's what happened. After Jesus did these miracles, the masses kept following him around like the paparazzi of London. Jesus tried to get away from the crowds but couldn't. So he basically said, "Look, you guys are following me around because you saw some miracles. I made some bread appear out of thin air. Now you're all excited. But all those 5000 people that I fed bread today are going to be hungry tomorrow. Their hunger will never end. But, I came not simply to provide bread for the body, but I came to provide bread for the soul. I came to give you something you can't get anywhere else. I am the bread of life. Those who believe in me will never hunger again. Those who don't believe in me will stay hungry all their lives."

This is the first of the great "I am" sayings of Jesus. John's Gospel is full of them. In other places Jesus said:
- I am the light of the world
- I am the gate
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the Way, the Truth and the Life
- I am the resurrection and the life
- I am the true vine

Each of these images gives us a different and important understanding of who Jesus is. Today's image is bread. Jesus makes a point of telling us he is the bread of life. What was he trying to get us to think? What is it about bread that reveals something about who Jesus is and what Jesus does?

I. Bread Nourishes

I think the first thing that comes to mind when we think about bread is that bread nourishes. It works. It satisfies. It eases the pangs of hunger. It gives us nourishment that we need day in and day out. It's plain and ordinary. It's different from culture to culture. Think about all the breads around the world. There are biscuits that grandma makes with buttermilk that is topped with butter and jelly. There are French croissants that are light and flaky. There is Middle Eastern bread that's flat and chewy. There's the crusty, delicious cornbread that I baked in an iron skillet last night for supper to go along with my vegetable soup. Some of my favorite bread growing up was mother's leftover pie crust. People don't make pies from scratch much anymore, but I remember the leftover pie crust was my favorite part. Moma would take those leftovers, lay them out
on a baking sheet, and cook them until they were just the right crispiness. They were like soft, hot crackers. I could eat them all day.

Those baked pie crust slithers satisfied. They were delicious and nutritious. They weren't fancy at all. Bread seldom is fancy. Biscuits, rolls, loaves are pretty basic stuff. Birthday cakes and wedding cakes are loaded with sugar, they are beautifully decorated and fun. Bread isn't any of that. It's just basic nutrition. And what about steaks? They're thick and juicy and delicious. But steaks aren't for everyone. Steaks are pretty expensive. They're for the elite. They clog the arteries. But bread is for everyone, old and young. Bread is one of the basic nutritional elements of life.

Jesus said whoever ate the bread of life would never hunger again. He would nourish those who believed in him and they would never be without nourishment. He is the one who can day in and day out, satisfy your hunger. But his nourishment is seldom dramatic. It's just plain, steady, daily and dependable. There is no substitute for Jesus. If he is in our lives, he is feeding our lives with joy, peace and love. But if he's not in our lives, an unceasing hunger pervades. There is an emptiness that can't be satisfied. There's a steady sense of anxiety and unease and confusion. But all of those are met in Jesus. He is the bread of life.

When I ask people why they come to church Sunday after Sunday, a good number of them say "I'm here to get nourished to make it through the week." In this church there is rarely anything dramatic that happens. We sing hymns, pray prayers, read the Bible, and listen to sermons. It's not birthday cake. It's bread. It's not candy. It's bread. It's not filet mignon. It's bread. It's about Jesus, a Galilean fisherman who was crucified out of political expediency, but who claims to have risen from the grave. We believe that, Jesus is alive and continues to nourish our souls, like ordinary bread nourishes the body. Jesus is the bread of life.

II. Bread is a Gift

Another element of Jesus' teaching about bread is his insistence that it is a gift. When Jesus was talking to the Jews about bread, he referred to the Old Testament narrative of the Hebrew people in the wilderness. Day after day manna would lie on the ground for the people to eat. It was called bread from heaven. Jesus claimed that he was the real bread from heaven. Those who ate the manna in the wilderness eventually died. But those who eat the bread from heaven would live forever. What he wanted them to know was that he was a gift. He was from heaven. He was God's gift to the world.

When you think about it, all bread is a gift of God, of God's rain, sun and soil. How easy it is for us to take for granted those things that seem to come to us so easily. Bread is here on the table for us to eat in a moment. But think about all that happened for it to get here. The farmer plowed the earth and sowed the seed. Rain watered the ground and the seed began to sprout. The farmer plowed and weeded and nurtured and harvested in due time. The grain was processed by the miller. The flour was transported by the trucker. The baker took the flour and worked it into dough in the early morning hours of a day. And then the risen dough was baked. The bread was packaged, shipped, unloaded, delivered, put on the shelves by the grocer, bought by someone with money that had been collected by all the church members. Then it was unwrapped, cut, and will be served in a few moments.
When we hold this bread in our hands, we are lifting up all of human community, the world, life itself. It is a gift from God from the sustenance of life.

And so it is with Jesus. Our relationship with Christ is utterly dependent upon Christ. And it is his gift, that he promises to give us what we need each day. And so he taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus is God's gift to us. We never should presume that we have created him or molded him according to our desires. No, all we do is receive him like a child receives buttered toast from her mother in the morning. We hold out our arms and Christ fills us up.

Will Willimon, former Dean of Duke Chapel, was once teaching about the Lord's Supper in a local church and he decided to ask the congregation to tell about the most memorable meal they ever had. They told of memories of meals in fancy French restaurants in Toronto, of a great little bistro they discovered in San Francisco, of a 6-course meal at a five-star restaurant in New York.

Then one man said, "The best meal I ever had was in WWII, the morning after a night of terrible battle. I staggered up over a hill and saw a woman from the Red Cross in a little trailer in a muddy field. I staggered through the muck to her trailer. She was handing out stale doughnuts and cold coffee. When she handed me mine, she smiled. After the night I had suffered, in that place, at the time, I'd have to say that was about the best meal I ever had."

The man's stale doughnut and cold coffee was a gift. In most circumstances it wouldn't be considered much of a gift. But it met his deepest need of physical hunger and social hospitality. Jesus is such a gift to the world. Many people don't think he's much of a gift. He's only a crucified carpenter's son from some God-forsaken place 2000 years ago. But for those who believe in him, he is the bread of life. He is the gift that makes life worth living. He is the gift that gives us hope in dying. He is the gift that helps us overcome guilt through radical forgiveness. He is the gift that provides joy in the midst of pain. He is the gift that nourishes us for our daily walk.

III. The hungrier we are, the better the bread

There's one other thing I would bring to your attention about Jesus' use of bread as a metaphor for His life. The hungrier we are, the better the bread. The hungrier we are, the more we appreciate the bread. Jesus made his statements about bread in the context of rejection. "Stop grumbling among yourselves," he said repeatedly to the Jews who were rejecting his ministry. They were grumbling "Isn't this Jesus, the carpenter's son? Don't we know his mom and dad? Isn't he like any of us? How can he claim to come from heaven above?"

But there were others who were hungry for God, they thirsted for righteousness as a deer pants for water in a dry desert. Many of them were the poor, blind, and lame who were left out of the world's goods. They were women who were considered as disposable second class citizens. They were lowly fishermen who longed to become fishers of men.

I'm reminded of the parable of the great banquet that Jesus told to teach about the Kingdom of God. The great king had prepared a fabulous feast with tables loaded with the best foods available. Fresh breads and tangy cheeses overflowed woven baskets. Invitations were sent out to the leading citizen of the community. When all the preparations were complete, the news was heralded and the call for dinner was made.
But hardly anyone came. They all had excuses. They were busy with many things. And so the kind had his servants go into the highways and byways of town and compelled the lowly and poor and leftout to come to his great banquet. And they came to enjoy the feast of all feasts, and there was still room left for others.

Those who have wandered farthest from God often recognize more than anyone how nourishing the bread of life is. In a former church, the deacons of that church hosted, paid for, and prepared a steak dinner for the residents of Potter's Wheel, a Christ-centered alcohol and drug regeneration ministry. About 40 residents ate steak dinners, baked potatoes, salads, desserts, and of course, bread. After the meal we joined in a worship service with them. Several of the residents shared how they had escaped the destructiveness of a world of drugs through the power of Jesus Christ. One young man, a golf pro at a nearby golf course, told of his journey to Christ. From the time of his early teenage years he had been caught up in a world of alcohol and drugs. It had consumed him and wrecked his future. When he was at the bottom of life’s barrel and all he could consider was suicide, he gave his life to Christ. He received the bread of life. He began attending Potter’s Wheel devotions and Overcomers Group, and he began to eat the non-alcoholic, non-toxic Bread of Life. He admitted he was powerless to overcome addictions, humbled himself before God and others, and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Today he has a wife and a career. He’s working on his golf game, has a job at a club, and is playing tournaments that could put him on the professional golf tour. Most importantly, he has the bread of life which has satisfied the hunger he had carried around for so many empty years.

**Conclusion**

Today there are people whose families are torn apart by conflict. Marriages are collapsing because the love that once existed seems to have burned out. The race to load up on more cars and computers and credit cards has left many adults hungry for more. Young people are pressured to do drugs and become sexually active before marriage. The temptations are great and some young people have given in. And yet, all this has left them empty. They are still hungry. And emptiness rests in the pit of the stomach. And they know life should be more than giving in to the pressures to wallow in superficial relationships.

There is an answer. There is a meal that satisfies. There is a bread that nourishes. It is Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” Come today and receive him. Chew on him, bit by bit, take your time and savor each morsel. It’s not dramatic. Just life giving. Let him become a part of your life and thereby give you life. You will not find life anywhere else.