

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (NRSV)

First Fruits and Tithes

26 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” ⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵ you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

John 6:25-35 (NRSV)

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

The Bread of life

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Texts: *Deuteronomy 26:1-11; John 6:25-35*

A good friend of mine is going to the Holy Land this spring. She's not the person I would have expected to be going to the Holy Land. I might have expected her to go to Israel, or to Jerusalem. But I don't think of her as going to the Holy Land. It's not that she isn't a Christian. She is. But she is the kind of Christian that I don't think of going to the Holy Land.

When I say I am going to Israel or Jerusalem or the Middle East, my interest can be as a distant observer. I'm interested in the political tensions. I'm interested in the history of that troubled region. I want to get a better sense of both the history and the modern dilemma. But when I say I am going to the Holy Land, I uncover my deep religious relationship to the place. I am no longer just a tourist. I am setting foot in the story of my own faith.

For many modern Christians going to the Holy Land is an idea filled with problems. It risks trampling centuries of people both before and since the time of Jesus. To see Israel and its environs as the Holy Land would seem to disregard the other peoples who have walked its roadways and who have found their own religious heritage on the same ground. Many modern Christians shy away from saying the Holy Land out of a well-placed respect for the others who find a different religious meaning in the place.

For other Christians the problem with the Holy Land terminology is more intellectual. When you go to the Holy Land today you can see the precise tomb where Jesus was laid, the exact site of Calvary, and certain the location of the Mount of Olives. If you skip over to Bethlehem, you can see the place where Jesus was born. And if you traverse up to Nazareth you can see the place where the angel visited Mary with the news that she would bear a son. And over at the edge of the Sea of Galilee you can see the very hillside where Jesus fed the 5000, referred to in this morning's passage from the Gospel of John. Most scholars and archaeologists roll their eyes at such claims. We simply do not know the location of these events, they say. The most cynical say that the Holy Land is little more than a tourist trap.

My friend is the kind of Christian who has clear and sincere respect for the many religious threads in the Middle East and who also wouldn't fall prey to the over-romanticized ideas that the Holy Land conveys. So I was a little surprised to hear her say that she was going to the Holy Land.

But the more I thought about it, the more I understood her idea. Today our neighbors are both across the street and across the globe. Sensitivity to the fact that not everyone everywhere sees things exactly the way we do has never been more important. Similarly, in our age many anti-intellectual forms of religious expression spread carnage in the name of God. In a time such as ours it is urgent not to give religions a free pass to rewrite history and science. On the other hand, right-minded caution at claiming too much has left many thinking Christians with a boring and contingent faith. They can hardly be called joyous followers of Jesus.

And that's a problem. No matter how we read it, it is inescapable that Jesus presented a

Gospel that was intended to shake our lives to the core. It was meant to change the way we live. It was meant to set us free from ourselves, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it. And in that new-found freedom we were meant to become joyous disciples. In that sense, we were meant to throw caution to the wind and embrace Jesus and his teachings with delight.

When my friend said she was going to the Holy Land, she meant that she convicted by the Gospel. I began to realize that she wanted to touch the ground from which that Gospel sprouted. And it was not because she thought the hill they said that Jesus fed the 5000 was the actual place. But it was that the place was something like the original. And sitting there in such a place ironically set the imagination free to more fully conjure up the story. It was a way to enter the Gospel. It didn't depend on being the exact historical location. And surely it was not about staking an exclusive claim to the place. Even as she longed to connect to the Gospel at this greater depth, my friend was not seeking to own the place. In fact, as she experienced the music of her own faith come to life, she more readily saw how the place might enliven the faith of Jews and Muslims and others, also. Krister Stendahl says the challenge of being a Christian in a world of many faiths is to learn to sing my song to Jesus without needing to call others dirty names. My friend is going to the Holy Land with this very intention.

*** I'd love to be there with her. I'd love to sit down on that hill by the Sea of Galilee something like the place where Jesus fed the 5000. I'd like to drink in the geography and the climate, feel the heat of the sun, see the desert plant life. Paul Nuechterlein, who has been there, says that the Sea of Galilee is surprising.¹ It's deep in a valley. The Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth, and the Sea of Galilee is just a few feet above that. So, it's hot as blazes down there, like Death Valley or the bottom of the Grand Canyon. And in ancient times the people didn't get around on tour busses. They walked. And even the people on tour busses today are told to carry plenty of water with them. The people who came to see Jesus would have walked, and they would have been used to carrying food and water in these conditions. It would have been a matter of survival.

So, imagine. You're out there on that hill. Maybe the original hill is not the one you're sitting on, but it doesn't matter. As Marcus Borg might say, the story may not even have happened the way it's written. And that doesn't matter, either. The story is true in a much larger sense than the exact facts or location. So, you're sitting there on the hill in the heat. You've got your survival rations with you. Evening begins to fall. It's getting to be time to eat. Jesus says, "Well, who has some food for us?" As you know, there isn't much to be found – a few fish and a few loaves of bread. Well, that's what Jesus gets when he asks people for what they have, anyway.

But imagine, you're sitting there. And in your sack, well, you've got enough for yourself.

Nuechterlein writes, "Was there really only five loaves of bread and two fish among the huge multitude that day? Or was that all the food that anyone would admit to, when the disciples polled the crowd to find some food? After traveling that land myself, I find it difficult to imagine that that's all there was. I can't imagine that people, living in that hot, harsh land would

¹Several of the ideas in the following paragraphs come from Nuechterlein at: http://girardianlectionary.net/less_fest/thanks2001_ser.htm

leave their homes and villages so unprepared. Our guides were careful not to let us foreigners leave our hotels unprepared each day. Why would native folks, who knew so well the bitter facts of survival in those days, do so?"

Imagine, you're sitting there. And in your sack, well, you've got enough for yourself.

Nuechterlein continues, "Let's say that the folks on the hillside that day did leave their homes and villages prepared. Most of them had satchels of food and water. So why only five loaves and two fishes when the disciples went out asking? Simple. Because of fearful, untrusting, ungrateful hearts. It's easy to imagine, isn't it? The disciples come asking for offerings of food, and you think, 'Gee, I have enough for myself and my family here, but what if I get it out in front of this big crowd? It'll be gone in no time flat, that's what! I'd better keep it hidden, and get it out later, after we leave and are alone.' Isn't that easy to imagine happening all over that hillside? So the disciples only come up with five loaves and two fish. In John's Gospel, he even tells us that it was a boy who offered it. That makes sense: a boy wouldn't know better. A boy wouldn't have learned the hard facts of survival yet, where everyone needs to watch out for themselves."

O brothers and sisters, imagine, you're sitting there. And in your sack, well, you've got enough for yourself.

And the boy comes forward with five loaves and two fish, and he gives them to the disciples, and the disciples give them to Jesus. And what does Jesus do? He starts breaking them up and handing them around. He doesn't hold onto them for himself and the disciples. He takes this tiny amount, which clearly isn't enough, and he begins to hand the pieces out to the crowd.

O brothers and sisters, imagine, you're sitting there. And in your sack, well, you've got enough for yourself. What are you going to do now?

The story tells us that everyone ate their fill. And then they collected the remainder, after all had satiated themselves. And there were twelve large baskets.

O brothers and sisters, imagine, you're sitting there. And in your sack, well, you've got enough for yourself. And that day you see a miracle. Jesus takes five loaves and two fishes, hands them out, everyone is fed – you, too – and there are baskets full left over.

What happened? Was it a magic trick? Maybe. Maybe not. What do you think? You are sitting there. You saw it. Was it a magic trick, or did you open up your sack? And did the people next to you, and the ones next to them open their sacks, too? Was the miracle a magic trick, the multiplication of loaves and fishes? Or was it the changing of fearful and fretful hearts? Was the miracle the multiplication of loaves and fishes, or the multiplication of generous and thankful hearts? You were there, on the bank by the Sea of Galilee. What do you say?

After this evening on the hillside next to the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and the disciples got in a boat and went across the sea. The people came rushing after him and found him on the other side. Jesus says to them, "I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." John uses the word signs to mean magic tricks. So Jesus says, "I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw magic tricks, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Jesus doesn't want them to be impressed with magic. But he also doesn't want them to stop at being thankful for the food either. He says they followed him because they all got food, which was wonderful, of course. But Jesus tells them that even better is the bread from heaven.

Like us, perhaps, Jesus' followers are confused. What is this bread of heaven? Jesus gives them a hint: "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Still confused, but intrigued, they say, "Give us this bread always." Finally, Jesus reveals his meaning, "I am the bread of life."

There are so many things Jesus means when he says this. But surely not the least is that he is the bread of life because he frees the human heart from its fear and self-centeredness. On the bank of the Sea of Galilee that day, he opened their hearts, and simply because of this change of hearts, they willingly opened their bags, and there was plenty of food for everyone.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. The bread that everyone ate that day on the hillside was the result of the bread of life with which Jesus had fed them. The bread of life was himself, his own example of generosity. In his example, they saw an open and generous heart. As they took in that example, the bread of life, it changed them. They became like him. The bread of life made them a new creation, if but for a moment.

Jesus says that if you eat the bread of life you will hunger no more. He means it on two levels. Generosity will provide plenty where there seems to be little, for it opens hearts, and open hearts are generous. As on the hillside that day, generous hearts give of the bounty that formerly they had hid and protected.

If generosity is the final effect of eating the bread of life, even greater is the intermediate effect. There is nothing more hungry than selfishness and fear, grasping and miserliness. The heart that hides and protects itself and its belongings, the heart that is suspicious of others and looks out only for itself, the heart that accumulates more and more so that it can be secure and happy, is a hungry and miserable heart. This heart can never be satiated. It can never feel the security and sufficiency it seeks. It is this hunger that is satiated by the bread of life.

My friend is going to the Holy Land, because she has found the bread of life. Now she wishes to sit on the hillside next to the Sea of Galilee and give thanks for what she has received. Amen.