

## **The Bread from Heaven, John 6:35, 41-51**

<sup>35</sup>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.

<sup>41</sup>Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” <sup>42</sup>They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” <sup>43</sup>Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup>No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. <sup>45</sup>It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup>Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup>Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup>I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup>Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup>This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup>I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

## Bread of Heaven

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Text: *John 6:25, 41-51*

One of the fondest memories I have of growing up is walking into the house to the smell of fresh-baked homemade bread. What a luxury it was. My mother was a fine baker, but many of her contemporaries avoided yeast breads at all costs. Some complained of the time it took. But others said yeast was mysteriously forbidding, and they became weak-kneed at thought of kneading and rising. It was also the 1950s. We were beginning the great mechanized age of light fluffy Wonder Bread, which the ads told us built strong bodies first eight, and then by the time I was in third grade twelve ways. Homemade things meant we hadn't caught up to the times. In our local area Dreikorns Bread competed with Wonder Bread with the catch line: Dreikorns Bread, untouched by human hands. But I was glad for my mother's hands that gave us hand-kneaded bread that filled the house with its unmistakable aroma.

That's what I think of when I hear Jesus say that he is the living bread, far more satisfying than the bread you eat. To me, that's quite a claim. There aren't many things better than fresh bread.

To his original hearers, though, it was an even greater claim. Daily bread was all that stood between them and non-existence. Daily bread was essential for life, and it could not be taken for granted. For many in Jesus' time, and for many right up until this time, getting enough to eat was a full-time undertaking. It was so important, that one would devote one's whole life to it, if necessary. But Jesus was worried. He told Satan himself that a man does not live by bread alone. Jesus was worried, but what was he worried about?

It has been said that many in our culture believe that if enough is good, then more is even better. If two aspirin are enough, three must be better. If enough to eat is good, a gourmet's choice is better. It seems built in to human nature to think that more bread, so to speak, is the way to greater well-being.

In James Michener's novel *Alaska* we meet the Idaho farmer John Klope. In 1897 at the age of twenty-seven, John and his family have survived the hard economic times of the late nineteenth century frontier. Their farm provides them bread enough. But John Klope caught sight of a newspaper from Seattle that announced, "A Ton of Gold Found in the Klondike." It was all he needed to see. It propelled him headlong into the search for more bread in the form of flecks of gold. John Klope embarked on a journey that would carry him thousands of miles over land and rivers, inside the Arctic Circle whose endless winter nights and waterways unfrozen but two or three months a year, a journey that would give him several close shaves with death over its two years to his destination. Once there John Klope worked a worthless claim until his resources were exhausted. Once, he had had enough eat, but he risked it all for more. In the end John Klope found no wealth or happiness in his search.

Where John Klope failed to find more wealth, though, many have succeeded. Indeed, some of us have succeeded. Recent research of work and living patterns in the United States

reveals some fascinating facts. Up until the middle of the last century, up until just after World War II, American middle class families worked hard and full-time to put bread on the table. American breadwinners provided for the necessities. But in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a new possibility arose. American families were earning more. They had more vacation time. With more money and more time off from work, American families, the pundits predicted were entering an unprecedented era of leisure time and leisure activities. They could provide for the necessities and still enjoy themselves.

But it actually turned out differently. By the three-quarter mark of the last century, most adult family members had become wage earners. That meant that in two adult households, both were working. It was a victory for women, though hard won; they took their rightful place in the work force alongside of men. But something odd happened along the way. With two people instead of one working, presumably for better wages than before, families found themselves increasingly hard-pressed to make ends meet. The promised time for enjoyment seemed an illusion. And by the beginning of this century, it had gotten even worse. Family members are working harder and longer hours than ever before, and still they feel financially squeezed and insecure.

What is going on here? Well the research unearthed some interesting data. Families indeed are earning more, even after you factor in inflation. And they are indeed having a hard time making ends meet. But what has changed since 1950 is that families are not working so hard to buy the mere necessities. Families are working harder and longer and making more, and the more they are making is going into what once would have been called luxuries – two cars instead of one, maybe even fancier and more expensive ones. Houses that were once considered satisfactory are now being torn down and replaced by ones that are truly mansions. Electronics and household conveniences once rare are commonplace. Even the youth of our families are working, not as they did in 1897, to help put bread on the table, but to afford the cell phone, the MP3 player, the video game player, the DVD player, the automobile with several hundred watts of amplified bass, and a wardrobe that pretends to be a hodgepodge but carries a price worthy of its designer label. But the question is, are we better off? Do we experience more well-being than those who came before us? Many psychologists tell us that today, in fact, we experience more pressure, and stress and strain than ever before.

If having enough bread on the table is good, we have thought that a bigger table, more cars in the garage, and a hundred other things would be even better. So enamored have we become with more that we have found ourselves incapable of taking the one thing on the list that might have helped – more time away from the rat race.

Now, I expect these are challenging, maybe even provocative thoughts. I know they are for me. I have more things than I need, and some of them mean more to me than they should, and yet I don't want to let them go.

In this morning's scripture we get an idea of just how challenging Jesus' words were to his first hearers, especially those who had some wealth and position. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus challenged them to find their treasure in what he offered them, rather than in riches or prestige or whatever else they craved after.

And their response is very clever. They say, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Like

schoolyard children, Jesus' hearers resort to remarks about Jesus' parentage. This scene appears with slight differences in all the Gospels. Jesus makes claims or shows his authority, and they say, "Wait a minute. Isn't this just Jesus, isn't his family from next door? What makes him think he is so smart?" In one instance Jesus says, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country."

This is the most generous interpretation. When you grow up with someone, when you see them as children and as young adults, it's hard to accept that they now have wisdom worth paying attention to. There's truth to that. But isn't there something even more dishonest going on here? Rather than discuss or deal with the things Jesus is saying, his opponents turn the conversation to question his bringing up and thereby his authority. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." And they don't ask what that means; they don't say they disagree with him; they say, "Who made you so smart? Aren't you just Joseph and Mary's boy?"

Ronald Heifetz famous book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, says that leaders face this treatment all the time. When someone tries to goad or encourage or even help people make needed changes, most of us resist. We don't like change. Even if it's bad for us, we prefer to stay where we are. So when someone tries to get us to change, we resist, and often the most effective way to resist is to sidetrack the project. If someone tries to get you to quit smoking, you know you can't win a direct argument about the merits of smoking. So, pretty soon, you turn it into something else – maybe a matter of rights: I have the right to do what I want; or maybe a matter of authority: who are you to tell me what to do? That's what Jesus faced. His opponents knew that they could not win a discussion about their wealth and prestige; they could not win a direct conversation about what they ought to do. So they say, Hey, you're just Joseph's boy. Who made you God?"

I suspect that many of us find ourselves in a similar position. How many of us suspect that the things we chase after aren't the really important things? How many of us believe that we are missing out on some essential things because we are too busy chasing some inessential things? How many of us know that the bread we are pursuing is not the bread that Jesus is talking about? The old song, "The House of the Rising Sun," says, "It's been the ruin of many poor boy, And me oh Lord am one." I suspect many of us if not ruined, know there are ways we are missing the boat.

What Jesus introduces us to first, then, is the need for a spiritual discipline. The first step in recovering from our pursuit of the things that don't matter to the loss of the things that do matter is to overcome our resistance to seeing things for what they are, and seeing our situation for what it is. That is, the first step is to give up the cute sidesteps, like, "Isn't that just Joseph's boy," give up those cute sidesteps and look closely and honestly at ourselves. And that is a spiritual discipline, because it takes more courage than we have alone; it takes God to lean on when you dare to question the things you are hooked on. Looking at our misguided dependencies is not for the feint of heart, which of course we all are, so we can't do it without leaning on and trusting God.

The second part, though, is the promise. Jesus says he is bread that is different from any bread we know; he is living bread. Jesus says, "I am living bread." He also says, "I am the light; I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the true vine; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus claims to be just about any important thing one can imagine.

But what does he mean? What exactly does he mean? Some people interpret Jesus to be making something like a deal. They say that if you believe in Jesus, then Jesus will save you. The implication is, if you don't believe in Jesus, you are lost. I don't think Jesus ever thought of himself in these terms. I don't think Jesus said to himself, "Well, I have the power to save people, but I won't do it unless they bow down and prove that they adore me." That is a Jesus too petty for me.

There's the story of the young woman who decided to become a Buddhist. She was very vociferous about her new faith. Her family was upset. And in some sense she was glad to make them upset, because she wanted to draw attention to herself and let them know that she had found the true path, and they had not. It was an adolescent thing to do. And as she matured in her Buddhist practice, she understood her arrogant mistake, and she changed. She said, "My family liked me much better when I decided to become Buddha-like rather than a Buddhist." Many Christians could learn this lesson. We are more likely to be truly Christian when we become Christ-like rather than contentiously Christian.

I do not think Jesus was trying to build a political following of supporters. But what I do think is that Jesus knew that if people followed him, if they connected with God in the way that he connected with God, if they understood and followed after the things that are good and matter in life, they will have found the gate to eternal life. This is the bread of heaven, the bread that never leaves you hungry, the bread that finally satisfies. Jesus offered his very self that we might feast on it. He offered his very self that we might turn away from those unsatisfying things that we nonetheless chase after. He offered his very self that we might eat of the bread of eternal life. Surely, surely this is bread from heaven. Amen.

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