

Shiloh United Methodist Church

John 6: 24-35

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February 25, 2018

The God We Can Know: “I Am the Bread of Life”

Worship intro:

Today we continue our study of the “I Am” sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. This statement today is “I am the bread of life.”

As we begin worship today I invite you to remember the smell of your favorite baked good. Imagine the smell, the satisfying taste of something fresh from the oven.

Most of the time we find ourselves doing what our culture tells us, wanting more of that perfect thing.

However, Jesus offered a new kind of bread...one that would satisfy...as we reflect and begin worship, imagine when you have felt truly satisfied with life and living, and remember that Jesus reminds us that God’s love can do that for us all the time.

My Grandma made this amazing banana bread. I still have that recipe, but it never measures up when I make it. I remember fondly playing outside her house in Three Forks and smelling that aroma. Then I would run inside to find a fresh piece on the table with butter on top and a glass of milk sitting beside it. My grandma would sit down and spend quality time while I consumed that bread. In my memory, I remember that single piece of bread being completely satisfying, especially with that swath of butter she put on that perfect bread.

The sermon series we are sharing in this Lenten season is about the “I Am” sayings of Jesus from of the gospel of John. Today’s in the scripture reading is, “I am the bread of life.” These “I Am” statements of Jesus are meant to help us understand the character of God better. Within the gospels there are also statements that echo these “I Am” statements that invite us to know who God calls us to be in our relationship with God. For this week the response to “I am the bread of life” is “Feed my sheep.” This passage from John 21 is the directions Jesus gives to Peter. We are called to know God will provide for us and we are invited to share the bread with others. These passages are meant to help us define God and who we will be as people of God.

Sometimes our own personal “I am” statements get filled up with so many negative things. “I am not...good enough, smart enough, skinny enough, healthy enough, manly enough, powerful enough, rich enough.” These things are what I like to call our “junk.” God continually says you are “children of God” and I created you to be loved. By studying the “I Am” sayings of Jesus I invite us to learn how God takes the “junk” we fill our “I am” statements with and replaces it with the good.

Today the invitation is to change our “I am” statement from “I am hungry” or “I want more” and to seek how we can more directly arrive at, “I am satisfied.”

I want to invite us all to close our eyes for a minute and remember a time when you could smell your favorite baked good. Maybe it is something your mother or another close relation made for you. Imagine for a minute the feeling of the smell as it filled your nose and your very being. For many of us we have a memory of a time when we sat down with a loved one and enjoyed their baked artistry. The very fact that the thing was baked with love made us feel a deep sense of satisfaction as we ate it.

Happy Meals were the first “eating out” food I remember asking for as a kid. There was something about the idea of getting a meal with a toy that seemed like it would be completely satisfying. I mean who wouldn’t be satisfied getting a toy from the newest movie release. Then I would get the meal and the toy and was never satisfied. Satisfaction most definitely never came from those toys. On TV they always looked like they could do great things, but they were always not quite what I hoped for. They got played with and then tossed into what I lovingly called “my junk drawer.”

There are so many things in our modern American culture that we think will fill us up, but they don’t. I don’t know how many technology devices I have bought assuming it was the best thing ever. Then I replaced that technology device as soon as the next one became available because the new one had a better gizmo. Companies know deeply our hunger for the next best thing and they know how to sell it.

We don’t need to feel guilty about being hungry. We are created to be hungry beings to grow and survive in the world. We are built for survival and as soon as we are born we are hungry for attention, connection, food, and love. This can be seen clearly in how a young child’s first instinct is to search out the mother after birth for food and connection. We then grow through a process of hunger and absorbing information from our parents and adults. Even in adulthood we are

hungry for all the things of childhood as well as relationships to connect with and support us. We are created to be hungry and hunger is the natural instinct that helps us to live and seek the things that support life.

The challenge of human hungers is it is unending and unquenchable. We will always have hunger for something because our bodies are finite and absorb resources to grow and develop.

Before I read the passage from John's gospel for today, I want to remind us of something about the history of our scriptures today. An understanding that I take from one of my spiritual mentors in the faith.

In John's gospel, Jesus refers to himself several times using a well-known image – or metaphor. He begins each one with *I am* and then continues. *I am . . . the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine, the way and the resurrection and the life.* Now let me say clearly what may be the most troubling thing some of you will hear today. ***It is highly unlikely that Jesus himself ever really talked that way.*** But, before you get nervous that I'm telling you right here in church that something written in the Bible might not be literally accurate, think about it. Even in those days, people didn't go around saying things like . . . *I am the light of the world. I am the Way. I am the Bread of Life.* That kind of talk would have driven people away, just as it would now. To be sure, I can think of a few people in my life who have *behaved* as if they thought they were the light of the world – but even they didn't actually *say* that! And they were not people I wanted to follow! This is where we must remember that none of the gospels were eyewitness accounts. They were and are instead faith statements, primarily concerned with communicating *who* Jesus was and what he meant. The gospel of John, written some 60 years *after* the

death and resurrection of Jesus, was written to a particular group of people who needed a message of hope. They didn't need to know so much *what* had happened to Jesus. But they *did* need some assurance and insight about what it all meant and whether it made a difference.

You see, by the time this gospel was written, the early Christian community was scattered. The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and it was a violent and brutal destruction. It had happened twenty-some years earlier, in the year 70. Those of you who travel to the Holy Land see evidence of it still. Somehow the Romans literally set stones on fire and toppled the magnificence of the Temple, crushing hundreds to death and leaving only debris. The smoke from that fire would have been visible throughout the countryside for days on end, much thicker and more enveloping than even the thickest smoke we've seen and smelled at times from summer forest fires. Those who followed Jesus would have been devastated by the Temple's destruction. Many would have lost loved ones. And, even as they mourned, many of their friends would have treated them with suspicion . . . *you still believe in that crucified Messiah? A lot of good he did for us. Rome holds power still. We are still defiled by Roman presence. In fact, perhaps your faithfulness to the one you call Jesus has brought the wrath of God on us all.* And with such rhetoric, brother turned against brother, sister against sister. In fact the anti-Jewish sentiment in John's gospel springs from such thinking.

So John's gospel was written against that backdrop, in that environment, prompting questions like *who was this Jesus?* Even more, *who is this Jesus? Dare we trust him still?* For to follow him was to leave behind family and

friends, faith and, for some, even a future in Israel. So they sat around, telling stories, remembering. I imagine clandestine campfires in the hills of Galilee. I imagine the sharing of meals and memories and, finally, whispered affirmations of how lives had been changed, darkness made brighter, paths made clearer, hungers satisfied – not by some doctrine or law but by a relationship to a person who lived still. Who led still. Who loved still. Whoever John was, he listened well to hearts and words - and then told his good news.

The *I Am* proclamations of Jesus found in John’s gospel were a means to an end – that being, to help believers of that time and of all time come to know and appreciate the power and the ongoing presence of the crucified Messiah. Thus, while the statements may not be the actual words of Jesus, they are profound reflections of who Jesus was and how he mattered to very real people. And I would say that, though not factually true, they are more importantly *really true!*¹

Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” The gospel of John is trying to show the deep sense of God as cosmic, spanning beyond time and space. When we hear “bread of life” we are meant to hear that God is here to meet our unending hunger. The scriptures of John 6 find Jesus feeding a multitude just before this. Jesus is teaching and his disciples want to send the people away, but Jesus invites them to buy loaves of bread from one boy and feed the people “as much as they want.” I would be skeptical in that moment as a disciple. “Jesus have you been in the sun to long.” They do as he instructs and surprisingly the people eat their full share.

¹ Sermon by Rev. Marianne Niesen, St. Paul’s UMC Helena, MT, March 1, 2015.

Jesus then goes away to pray, after a short stroll on the water. The crowds seek after him hungrily, but he has cautiously gone away to have some time with his disciples. Jesus' disciples are hungry to know more about Jesus and what he can do for them. The disciples beg desperately to get the bread that Moses and Israelites received in their journey to the Promised Land.

John 6:24-35 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁴ When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

²⁶ Jesus replied, "I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted. ²⁷ Don't work for the food that doesn't last but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Human One will give you. God the Father has confirmed him as his agent to give life."

²⁸ They asked, "What must we do in order to accomplish what God requires?"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "This is what God requires, that you believe in him whom God sent."

³⁰ They asked, "What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*"

³² Jesus told them, "I assure you, it wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

³⁴ They said, "Sir, give us this bread all the time!"

³⁵ Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In the stories in Exodus, God's people are starving in the desert as the journey to the promise land. God gives them bread in the form of manna. This light flakey substance was found each morning on the ground. The people were instructed to only take what they could eat and be satisfied with. This bread sustained them until they reached their destination in the Promised Land with many sources of food. And when the Israelites crossed the river into Canaan they had to leave behind this miracle for the opportunity in the Promised Land.

Jesus reminds the disciples after they ask for this bread, "The real significance of that Scripture is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven but that my Father is right now offering you bread from heaven, the *real* bread. The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving life to the world."ⁱ

Jesus is talking about something miraculous that is happening all the time. This is something that is cosmic and beyond time itself. The miracle he is trying to get us to see is God provides all we need from one moment to the next; we just need give God the opportunity to provide this satisfaction.

As I think back to the banana bread moments with my Grandma I realize they taught me to understand what satisfaction was. My grandma shared with me a glimpse of God's satisfaction through sharing love and relationship with me. My banana bread will never taste as good because the satisfaction of enjoying my grandmother's company and love was the key ingredient. Like the Israelites leaving behind the miracle of the Manna, I too have to leave behind the hope the banana bread will ever satisfy me in the same way.

God's love is the key ingredient to our satisfaction. And we have to find ways to teach ourselves to look for it, so we can fill in our "I am" statements with "satisfied." The more we can allow God to be our

satisfaction the less we will concern ourselves with buying the new toys or dwelling on the missing ingredient from the past.

That was what the early Christians were trying to get us to understand in John. Was that in communion in the sharing of the body of Christ we are connected not to be full in our bellies, but full in our being. Against the backdrop of the early Christian movement when it looked like Christ wasn't making the world anew, the people of God decided to let us know that God can satisfy us. To remind the people in a dark time to look for the light, to know that in a meal like communion we are drawn together into a satisfied community that can in turn feed 5000 more.

Remember the Happy Meals I talked about? About 3 years ago our oldest daughter had this moment when she asked if she could go get a Happy Meal. I struggled not to be a little disgusted, knowing the disappointment Happy Meals caused me. We don't go that often though, so we said, "That is the kind of thing we might be able to do on your birthday." Well at that time my daughter had taken a keen interest in tracking the calendar. We got a freebie calendar in the mail at the beginning of the year and she had marked all our birthdays and vacation on it. My daughter said, "No, we can't go to get a Happy Meal on my Birthday. I will miss church night."

My daughter was saying to me, "Dad that Happy Meal stuff is great, but I don't want to miss the relationships that count." She knew what was satisfying to her was being in relationship, being loved, and playing with friends.

This is the satisfaction of God, it is being in relationship with God. Jesus shows us what that relationship looks like it is being love and creating with God. God will provide us all with deep satisfaction and give us chances to bake that satisfaction into moments for others.

As you journey through lent, remember lent is an invitation to learn how to seek God again, to remember the relationship of being loved and then to let God be our satisfaction again. Jesus promised us this love would satisfy us beyond all the things past and future, if we can just look and see what God is providing right now.

And here's the thing . . . people are still hungry in the world – for bread and love and comfort and healing and community. The need for spiritual and physical bread does not go away. And the job of the church – to share real nourishment, real bread, real life continues. That means, I believe, that the fundamental job of the church is not to share rules and laws– which only leads to fighting and dissension and deciding who is in and who is out. Our fundamental job is to offer bread, without limits and without judgment. Bread. Hope. Grace. It is dangerous work and has never been well understood. To know Jesus as the bread of life is to recognize that the Jesus who feeds us asks us in turn to feed others. It is to recognize that we will never be satisfied with just having more stuff. We will only be satisfied as we share what we have with others. Bread for the multitudes. Broken and shared. To know Jesus as the bread of life is to recognize that the real miracle here is not in the bits of bread we share but in the nourishment, we find and then become.

At least in part, I think, that was what our ancestors wanted us to know about Jesus who was and is the *Bread of Life*.

Let us pray . . . your response is on the screen . . .

When we feel hungry for more of something –even when we’re not sure what that something is, we can remember what Jesus said,

Response: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”

When we feel distracted by other means of fulfillment in the world, help us to remember what Jesus said,

Response: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”

When we look around at friends and strangers, assessing how we measure up to others, help us to remember that we are enough and are satisfied by God’s grace because Jesus’ words are true,

Response: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”

When we worry that the satisfaction we have now may one day run out, let us rest in the truth and fullness of Jesus’ promise,

Response: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”²

ⁱ John 6:32-33

²Rob Fuquay, *The God We Can Know*, Upper Room Books, © 2014. This is the series we are using. Prayer is from the Adult Group Guide. Check it out at www.thegodwecanknow.com.