

The Bread of Life

Exodus 16:1-15, John 6:22-40 (ESV)

February 18, 2007

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.... For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” Here is good news, pure and undiluted, for all who hunger, for all who suffer, and for all who die. Is this for you? Do you ache for that which sustains life? Do you weep for what has been lost? Do you yearn for peace at the end? Look no farther.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” More than the loaves he multiplied by the sea, more than the manna in the wilderness, Jesus Christ himself is the bread of life. Jesus does not simply tell us about the gifts of God; he is the gift from God. Jesus does not simply tell us what we need; he is what we need. Jesus does not simply teach about the word of God; he is the word of God. Jesus does not simply point us toward God; he is God himself present with us. And so Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” He is the one thing we need to live. He is the sustenance we need to live forever.

How do we eat this bread of life? Jesus Christ is no longer present to us physically. But he continues to be present to us in the word. Jesus calls us in the reading and preaching and hearing of the word. We come to Jesus and eat the bread of life by hearing and believing the word of God. This does not happen just anywhere. It happens when the church is gathered in hearing, believing, and obeying the word. The point of eating the bread of life is to believe in Jesus, to trust him. It means that we hear the living Christ in the word read and preached. We receive that word with confidence and trust. We are shaped and reshaped by the word. We are formed and reformed by the word. We are born and reborn by this hearing and believing. We are made alive by the one to whom the word bears witness. We are met by the one of whom to word speaks.

Augustine once prayed, 1600 years ago: “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they find their rest in you.” Our deepest needs are addressed by God who made us for himself. To meet this one in the word is to eat the bread of life. This is to believe in Jesus Christ. This is to trust in him and not our own efforts. This is to cast

aside all other bread and to follow Christ alone. If we are hungry for the bread of life, we receive it and eat it by hearing and believing the word of life.

Jesus also said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." There is but one way to the Father, and that is through the Son (John 14:6). There is but one way to the Son, and that is through the Father. Why are you here today? You are here because God has called and gathered you here to give you to his Son. And what God intends, he does; what God purposes, he accomplishes (Isaiah 55:11). "All that the Father gives me will come to me." It is the good will, intention, and purpose of God that you come to his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and that through his Son you come to him. That is why we are here today. Thanks be to God!

Did you think we were doing something for God by being here? God is doing something for us. God is doing something to us. God is giving us to his Son. Yes, we hear the word. Yes, we receive the bread of life. And the point of that is that we become his. We are given to him. We are drawn to him (John 12:32). We come to him. We belong to him. It is our life to realize that.

Moreover, Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out." We are not on probation. We are not here on a trial basis. We are not waiting for a later decision. We are living in the promise of Jesus Christ. Those whom the Father gives to the Son, the Son keeps forever and ever. You can count on that. Nothing else in this life is as sure as that. Nations rise and fall. Empires come and go. Jobs use us up and throw us out. Everyone we know and love eventually dies. In many ways it is true that life comprises a series of losses. But Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out." There is an assurance we can find nowhere else.

Jesus also said, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Surely this is the reason for the bread of life. This is the goal and purpose of not hungering. This is the result and significance of never thirsting. It is the will of the Father to give us eternal life. The way this is brought about within us is by our believing in the Son, and the Son himself will confirm that by raising us up at the end of time. Thanks be to God!

We live in an age not easily convinced of the power of the word and thus hesitant to avail itself of the bread of life. And yet, there are examples around us which may point the way. Let me tell you a story about words and life. In Demopolis, Alabama, in October of 1987, a little boy named Rocky Lyons saved his mother's life. Rocky was five years old. His mother was driving them to town in their pickup truck when she had a wreck. They went over a forty-foot embankment, out of sight from the road. His mother could not see, because of blood in her eyes.

She could barely move, because both her shoulders were broken. And she sent Rocky away because she was afraid the truck would explode.

At first he obeyed, but then he returned. Remember that Rocky was only five years old. He weighed only fifty-five pounds. Yet, he gradually pushed and carried his mother all the way up the forty-foot bank! He got her to the edge of the road. Someone found them there and took them to the hospital. Rocky saved his mother's life! What captured my attention in the news reports was this: all the way up the bank, he repeated the lines, "I think I can, I think I can." ["A Holiday for Heroes: The Little Boy Who Could," *Newsweek*, 4 July 1988, p. 35.]

We recognize these from the children's book, *The Little Engine That Could*. These words kept Rocky going! That story made it possible for him to save his mother's life. We realize that this was not a story he had heard only once or twice. It was his all-time favorite. Rocky had insisted that his mother and father read it to him over and over again, night after night. And so it was that this story shaped him so much that he got his mother up that hill. So it was that this story formed his character to such an extent that it focused his energies under pressure to save his mother's life. I do not even agree with the claim of the story that we can do anything we think we can. That is simply not true. But the point that impresses me here is the power of this favorite, repeated story to mold a little boy's life to heroic stature.

If a child's story can do that, what would happen to a whole church formed and reformed by the repeated reading, preaching, and hearing of the living Word of God, the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the very bread of life? Think of a church so confident in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ that no other loyalties distract it. Think of a church so shaped into the image of Christ's ministry that all who see its works give glory to God. Think of a church so informed by the story of the cross that it accepts its own suffering without complaint. Think of a church so shaped by the reality of the resurrection that eternal life becomes a quality of its present life. Think of a church so believing and trusting in Christ that it fears no earthly rulers. Think of a church that, having feasted on the bread of life, has so much left over that it takes twelve baskets full throughout the community, sharing the joyful word with all. Think of a church that finds its way in Jesus Christ, cherishes his truth over all falsehoods, finds its very life in Christ, and pours out that life for others.

The eating of the bread of life is not for our benefit alone. Elton Trueblood once wrote, "You have made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when you plant shade trees under which you know full well you will never sit." We are able to be gathered here in worship today, at least partly because of the labors of others, all of whom have gone before us, labors of planting trees, of

planting and building this church, and of passing on the faith to another generation. As a result, we enjoy and appreciate this wonderful congregation.

But this raises the question of what planting we are we doing. What additional great shade trees are needed here, and need to be planted today, even though none of us will be around long enough to sit under them? What do we need to do today not only to preserve all that is good in this church but also to strengthen and to increase it, so that our children and our children's children also can and will come here to worship God and so to eat the bread of life? What additional missions can we provide to serve human need and alleviate misery around us? What additional programs do we need for our children, to compete with the multi-faceted, fast-moving, sophisticated appeal of the great big world out there, which wants to win their hearts and souls and time and money to serve its purposes rather than God's purposes? What additional ministries do we need to start now, in order to help insure, as far as humanly possible, that this congregation will thrive in faithfulness so that those who come behind us will also share in the high privilege of hearing the word of God and thus eating the bread of life?

Do you ache for that which sustains life? Do you weep for what has been lost? Do you yearn for peace at the end? Look no farther. Here is good news, pure and undiluted, for all who hunger, for all who suffer, and for all who die: Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.... For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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