

FIRST LESSON: Exodus 16: 11-26
SECOND LESSON: John 6:25-35
November 20, 2022

“The Bread of Life”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The Old Testament has some little hidden gems in it, like the meaning of the word “manna” for instance. It seems to be derived from what the people said when they first saw it, which was, “What is it?” (man-hu) Maybe we can call it “what” for short. This seems a reasonable naming practice for a God whose name Yahweh means “I am who I am,” and also “I am who I will be.” The grammar is not real clear. But the point of all this is not that God has a sense of humor, which I am sure God does, but that God **provides**. The people had left Egypt behind. They were in the wilderness. It was dry and very little around them would sustain life. “What do we eat?” was a real concern. We hear that they were “grumbling” but I suspect modern Americans would be doing much more than grumble! Organizing committees and yelling a lot would be more like it.

God heard them and provided “bread” in the morning and meat at night. They had manna in the morning and quail at night. Anything else they were able to gather would supplement this. This provision was straight up miraculous. Strange substances that can be eaten don’t just appear overnight, and quail don’t spontaneously offer themselves. In addition, God provided exactly what they needed. If they tried to save any surplus of the manna it spoiled and went bad, except for on the Sabbath. Then they were told to collect enough for two days and it did not spoil. But hoarding was not possible. There was no trade in extra manna going on. No one had more than they needed, and no one had less.

Bread is basic to life. It formed the foundation of the ancient middle eastern diet, much like rice does in many places in the world. Manna could be baked or boiled to make it into something like bread. Food was a scarce commodity then and it is still all too scarce in many places in the world today. When facing starvation gold is worthless, but bread is everything. 10% of the world’s population face starvation today due to famine and war. It does not have to be this way. Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya are dealing with crippling drought but other places in the world have food. There is enough to feed everyone if there is a will to do so. But human nature is self-centered, and unless it is on our doorstep, and sometimes even then, we are capable of ignoring these terrible needs.

Jesus described himself as “the bread of life.” But what came BEFORE he said this is critical to its interpretation, because what came before was the feeding of the 5000. The people had just experienced Jesus feeding them bread, A LOT of bread. This was a world in which going hungry was common and starving to death a very real possibility. There were no safety nets, and no food pantries to go to. And Jesus literally fed these people. Hungry people do not think abstractly. They want to know where their next meal is coming from. So when they approached Jesus a bit later he knew that their motivation was their stomach. He flat out told them that he knew they were there “because you ate the loaves and had your fill.” But Jesus then totally confused these literalists because he proceeded to say, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” This led to an exchange in which it became clear that what was required to receive this “food” was that they believe in and follow Jesus. They in turn responded with a variation of “prove it,” asking him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

In other words, “If you’re going to open a divine bake shop in the wilderness that will just keep churning out endless free bread, count me in.”

Jesus must have been a very patient man because he explained, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

They still didn’t get it. They were still looking for bread. They asked Jesus to give them this bread, so finally he said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Well that’s not strictly true is it? At least not in the literal physical sense. We all have bodies with physical needs. God knows that we have these physical needs and asks us to trust God to provide for them. And when God alerts us through the news media of people starving in the world God expects us to do something about it, because God uses people to answer prayer. It is our job to be listening. We can not only pray for those in need we can donate directly to agencies helping in these regions. And we can put pressure on our leaders to deliver humanitarian relief. We may feel powerless, but we are not entirely powerless. There are even those in our own community going hungry, and we can help by stocking food pantries, giving to charities and volunteering. We can share what we have and feed people.

Bread in the ancient world was understood to be the foundation of survival. In the developed world we live in we are one step back from actual bread. What we consider necessary is what we need to **buy** bread, money. And isn’t it interesting that the word “bread” is actually slang for money? Ever had anybody ask you if you “have any bread?” or “can loan me some bread?” or even, “do you need some bread?” They’re not talking about whole wheat. They’re talking about money. Maybe in our world Jesus would have said, “I am the dollar of life” because we need this dollar to survive in our world. Jesus was using a metaphor. He is what we need. Spiritually we cannot survive without

him. We live between two worlds and God knows that. The physical world demands our attention. But God wants us to live in this world in a different way. Bread, or money, should not be our focus.

The ancient Israelites tried to hoard manna. They failed. It would not keep. We try to hoard money. Money doesn't spoil, although it can lose value. God designed a system in which everyone had enough, not too much and not too little. We have designed a system in which a few have an unbelievably excessive amount, and the majority not enough to live on. And congregations like ours are very much in the middle. And yet we still live with anxiety. Everyone I know suffers anxiety around money. The story from Exodus tells us clearly that God will provide for our daily needs, when we need them, not necessarily ahead of time. We want everything ahead of time. But just as the ancient Israelites could not hoard the manna ahead of time, God wants us to trust that we will receive what we need, when we need it. We spend so much time and energy earning the next dollar we forget that it is Jesus, not money, who brings life. And our Heavenly Parent does know that we need actual things to survive, even if we generally don't need as much as we think we do. Much good can be accomplished if we live simply in order that others may simply live. We can afford to be generous because we serve a generous God who will provide for us.

Today is stewardship Sunday, and while I do need to remind you of the importance of supporting this congregation lest we cease to exist, we exist together as the body of Christ to serve, not as an end in itself. We are here to work together as a team to help the world. There are huge needs and God wants us to be part of the solution. When Jesus said "I am the bread of life" he was speaking about the totality of our lives, not merely survival. Only Jesus can **truly sustain life**. Only Jesus can fill the emptiness and bring meaning and purpose. Only Jesus can break the chains of sin and free us. Our calling is to bring to the world that gift, the love of God in the person of Jesus and bread for the hungry, literally and spiritually. Amen.

Exodus 16: 11-26

¹¹ The Lord said to Moses, ¹² "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'"

¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat." ¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'"

¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

19 Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.”

20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

21 Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. **22** On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. **23** He said to them, “This is what the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’”

24 So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. **25** “Eat it today,” Moses said, “because today is a sabbath to the Lord. You will not find any of it on the ground today.” **26** Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.”

John 6:25-35

25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

26 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. **27** Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

28 Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

29 Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

30 So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? **31** Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

32 Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given 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 the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

34 “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

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