

What Is **Bread** to Life?

What Is Bread to Life? Series.3.

August 9, 2015

Rohnert Park – St. John's UMC

The church of Christ, in every age beset by change but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice cry for shelter and for bread to eat, and never live until they die.

Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed, can cure the fever in our blood, and teach us how to share our bread and feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord, to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.

This hymn, #589 in our hymnal, powerfully portrays the plight of so many of God's children:

"Across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice cry for shelter and for bread to eat, and never live before they die." *And never live before they die.*

The reality becomes all the more poignant when I allow myself to linger on and ponder the word *children*. How many kids go hungry in the world and in our nation, in our community? With the crowd chasing after Jesus, I want a sign that God is doing something new – something that human-created circumstances and conditions cannot undermine or negate.

As someone familiar with how Bible stories end, I am sometimes impatient with the crowd chasing after Jesus. Then I contemplate this story through the realities of our world. As long lines for humanitarian aid demonstrate, eating your fill one day does not mean that you will not be hungry the next. When there is no food, and you do not know how you will sustain your life today, what is the point of working for eternity?... Think parents whisking their children out of their beds in Egypt -- or Central America -- on the promise of a better life, only to watch their kids starve to death (or get blown to bits) in the desert.

Some things are worth complaining to God about. Sometimes, asking God for assurance that God is still with us is understandable, even appropriate.

Last week, the scripture reading ended with verse 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."

This week, the scripture reading repeats verse 35 again: "*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."* ...and then goes to verses 41-51, in which the crowd pushes back that he, Jesus, can't possibly be the bread of life! After all, they have known him since he was a kid, and not a very special one at that! Hold that thought; perhaps they didn't know the next steps in the story behind a loaf of bread!

When the ancients discovered a food which would keep through the winter months, and could be multiplied in the summer, it could be said that civilization began. They would have a reasonably safe store of food to carry them over, which would give them time to develop other useful skills besides hunting, fishing and cattle-herding.

In Old Testament times, all the evidence points to the fact that bread-making,... preparing the grain, making the bread and baking it, was the women's work; but in the palaces of kings and princes and in large households, the bakers' duties would be specialized. Bread was leavened, by first adding an agent in the form of a "barm" to the dough which caused the mixture to rise in the shape of our familiar loaf, like sourdough bread rounds. The hurried departure of the Israelites from Egypt prevented their bread from being leavened as usual; that is why the Jews commemorate the event by eating unleavened bread on special occasions. The ruins of Pompeii and other buried cities have revealed the kinds of bakeries which existed in those historic times. There were public bakeries where the poorer people brought their bread to be baked, or from which they could buy ready-baked bread.

A Bakers' Guild was formed in Rome in about the year 168 BCE. From then on, the industry began as a separate profession. The Guild or College (actually called Collegium Pistorum) did not allow the bakers or their children to withdraw from it and take up other trades. The bakers in Rome at this period enjoyed special privileges: they were the only craftsmen who were freemen of the city, all other trades being conducted by slaves. The members of the Guild were forbidden to mix with 'comedians and gladiators' and forbidden from attending performances at the amphitheatre, so that they might not be contaminated by the vices of ordinary people. No wonder the crowd took issue with Jesus cal-

ling himself bread! He was a commoner! They (the ordinary people) had known him all of his life! How could they accept and believe?

Because to accept that Jesus is the bread of life is to trust that God is doing something new that human-created conditions and circumstances cannot undermine or negate. To believe is to submit everything, even our highest-stake issues, to God's saving work in Jesus. To believe is not so much about what *we* do, as being open to what *God* is doing.

Of course, being open to what God is doing and submitting everything to Jesus means we might not do what is wise, practical, advantageous, safe. In fact, being open to what God is doing and submitting everything to Jesus means that ***our doing*** is less important because we are not in charge, as I pointed out last week, let alone in control.

Now, if we are going to give up all control, we need some assurance, some guarantee... a guarantee like manna in the wilderness. What we realize, when we give up all other explanations, is that what made the feeding of the 5000 men and the women and children on the grass that day, the feeding that started this story and its progression a *sign* was NOT the manna, but that *the manna came down from heaven...* that God was doing a new thing. The people merely had to agree to distribute it as it was needed, and not to hoard it.

What is the ***bread*** that fulfills our hunger and our thirst? It is that Jesus frees us to follow him... not to achieve self-satisfaction, not to get anything that is in it for us (there *is* no gospel of prosperity), not even to attain or maintain peace of mind. Jesus frees us to embrace God's redeeming will to restore the cosmos to what God created it to be... and to embrace God's redeeming will to restore humanity to what God intends. Such faith does not mean separating the spiritual out of the social. It means putting God, rather than us, at the center of both... spiritual *and* social. When we do, we can join the Guild of Bakers for God... and help to be bread for the world. Alleluia! Amen!