

“The Bread of Life, Part 2,” 12 Pentecost
August 12, 2018
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Texts: (2 Sam.18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Ps.130); Eph.4:1-16; John.6:35,41-51

John is structured around signs, sometimes called miracles, something extraordinary that Jesus does, and then the explanation of its meaning in the discourse that follows. Gradually, we learn who Jesus is, as John sees him. John has a very high Christology. To him, Jesus always knows that he has come from God so that we might understand what God is like. This is our third week on John 6. The signs are Jesus feeding the 5,000 followed by his walking on water. The discourse is on the bread of life.

In many of these stories, Jesus identifies himself by the “I am” or “*ego eimi*” metaphor. This is taken from Exodus 3, where Moses, after being called to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, asks God for a name. God replies, “I am who I am.” For example, in John 4, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus identifies himself as the living water. In John 10, he says, “I am the Good Shepherd” and “I am the Gate for the sheep.” In John 11, at the raising of Lazarus, he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” In John 15, he says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. In John 6, he says “I am the bread of life.” As we explore this passage, we will seek to discern what that means.

In the story of the feeding of the multitudes, especially in John, there are many comparisons to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after they have crossed the Red Sea and escaped from slavery in Egypt. Jesus is the New Moses. The story is the New Exodus. He teaches on a mountain, much as Moses brought the law from Mt. Sinai. Mountains are also important in scripture because they are symbols of the center of the universe. The feeding happens in a deserted place, like the wilderness. There are no stores, shops, or fast food places.

In the discourse, the bread of life is compared to the manna which God provided after the people complained that they would rather be back in the slave pits of Egypt than to be hungry and thirsty in the desert. Every morning, the manna would appear on the ground. The Israelites were to collect enough for that day and no more, except on the day before the Sabbath, when they could collect a double portion. If they collected more than they needed, it would spoil. God provided enough, but not too much. The point that John is trying to make in v. 32, part of last week’s reading, is that it is not Moses that provided the manna, but God. Jesus replaces Moses in this story, as representative of God. In other wilderness stories, God also provides water from the rock and quail for meat. Though it may not have been an interesting and varied diet, it was enough. In the feeding stories, there is an abundance of food. There are 12 baskets left over after all have been fed from the five loaves and two fish, enough to feed the 12 tribes of Israel.

In today’s portion of the reading, the crowd, identified as Jews, complains about Jesus’ identification of himself as the bread of heaven. Wasn’t he this kid that grew up down the block, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother were known to the community? How could he have come from heaven? Jesus’ answer addresses several themes that we find throughout John. First, it is God who draws us to Jesus. We do not come of our own accord. Second, it is in Jesus that we are able to see God, who comes in human form through Jesus’ incarnation.

Third, “whoever believes has eternal life.” Belief is not a list of propositions that we must agree to in order to be saved, but it is placing our trust in God through Jesus. Eternal life is not simply “pie in the sky bye and bye,” but abundant life right now. In addressing questions of life and death, I turn to several passages in Paul’s letters. In Romans 6:3-4 he says, “When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. “ In Romans 8:38-39, he says, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Romans 14:7-9, he says, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” So also in John; there is not an absolute distinction between life and death because eternal life is both now and forever and we are always in God’s hands.

At the end of the feeding story, Jesus retreated into a quiet place because he feared that the crowd was about to make him king. In the first century, the common view of the Messiah was that he would come into power, throw out the Roman oppressors, and restore Israel to its greatness as it was under King David. In several places, Jesus refutes this claim, especially as he tries to explain to the disciples that he must die and rise again. Crucifixion and the vision of the Messiah just didn’t seem to fit together, even though the Suffering Servant poems in Isaiah suggest such a model.

Most of the crowd probably came from impoverished circumstances. If Jesus could be king and provide them with the physical food that they needed, then they could stop worrying about where their next meal would come from. The feeding of the multitudes and the discourse on the bread of life suggest that Jesus was concerned both about physical and spiritual food. The church has long regarded feeding people as an important part of its mission.

In 1993, when I was in Arpin, we took a group of people to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference in Colorado. In one class, the instructor asked participants how they welcomed people into their church. Twelve year old Josh Smith, a part of our group, said, “We feed ’em.” Arpin continues with that mission today, still helping with Soup or Socks, offering meals to the community, taking Christmas baskets to needy families, and participating in the CROP Walk. For the last several years, they have contributed the third largest amount to the Marshfield CROP Walk, following Faith Lutheran and this church, both of which are much larger.

The national church addresses the hunger problem through the Presbyterian Hunger Program, a part of our One Great Hour of Sharing offering during Lent, and through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Last year, they provided assistance during the hurricanes, and currently they are addressing the situation with the fires in California.

The CROP Walk is a project of Church World Service. As I explained in Discovery Time, 75% of funds raised go to world hunger relief, both in disaster and famine and in assisting subsistence farmers in being able to raise more food for themselves and their families. 25% of the funds raised are for local hunger projects. Here, most of it goes to Soup or Socks, but there are two churches from Stratford that participate, so we send 25% of what they raise to their pantry.

Vacation Bible School has been collecting food for Soup or Socks and for the Nutrition on Weekends program, which provides assistance for children from families that are food insecure.

So we do a good job of meeting people's physical needs by providing food. We do a good job of addressing many issues of peace and justice in our community. However, Jesus was talking about spiritual food as well as physical food. We need to seek spiritual growth as individuals, as a congregation and as a part of the larger church. The Presbyterian Church took a big step forward in 1978 when our own Howard Rice, a child of this church, was moderator of General Assembly. He strongly stressed that spiritual growth and peace and justice all go together. He wrote a book, Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers, in 1991, as well as A Book of Reformed Prayers and The Pastor as Spiritual Guide. When I was still in California, he started monthly Friday evening ecumenical services using the format of the Taize Community in France. They include prayerful chants, such as the one we sang for an introit this morning, "Eat This Bread," periods of silence for meditation, and contemplative scripture reading. We have done an occasional service like this. When I was at Synod School two weeks ago, the keynoter was Jason Santos, who is with the department of spiritual formation in our Louisville office. He also used Taize material in his presentations. Our new hymnal also includes some of the music of John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland, similar to Taize.

The feeding of the multitudes also is a warrant for our services of Holy Communion. There we receive a small amount of food as a symbol of Jesus as the bread of life. Communion celebrations are a time to remember those who do not have enough to eat. Howard Rice also stressed frequent communion when he was chaplain of San Francisco Theological Seminary. He held a weekly celebration on Friday noon in the seminary chapel. He also developed a January conference called "Companions of the Inner Way," which assisted attendees in spiritual growth.

We are the Body of Christ. His hands are our hands. We are called to feed all God's people.