

“Bread of Life”

On Friday, overnight and into Saturday, Kelly and I visited our daughter, Tarah, and her husband in Indianapolis. As we finalized our plans regarding work schedules and our arrival time, I asked Kelly to give a message to our daughter. I said, “Be sure she makes a reservation at a good restaurant.” I love our kids and love spending time with them but, apparently, my priority as I anticipated us being together is that I would be well fed. Before you judge me too harshly, have you given thought to brunch or lunch yet today? Have you ever sat at the table finishing a meal and then begun planning the next one? Jesus knew what he was doing when he made the connection between himself and what is one of our major concerns, food. “I am the bread of life,” he said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...” Jesus goes right to the base of our need. We want to be fed. We need food in our bellies. When we’re hungry it is hard to focus on anything else until that gnawing emptiness inside of us is filled. You may be wondering, did we have a good meal on Friday evening with our kids? Yes, we did. I was more than filled up. But, here’s something else I realize as I reflect on the experience. I enjoyed the meal, not so much because of the ambience of the place, or what the menu offered, or the presentation and taste of the food. We were together. We were family around that table. It’s sounds poetic, I know, but it’s true. Love is what made the food taste so good. What’s the real hunger in our lives?

“I am the bread of life,” said Jesus. Love and grace and comfort and peace is what Jesus serves up. He knew the crowd was thinking about bread, the kind that is baked and then broken but he was pointing the crowd to himself. “I am the bread,” he said. He used a physical reality to point to a spiritual truth. His mission would become a source of nourishment for them. His life, which would include both a dying and rising in God, would be food for their souls. Jesus never discounted the human concern for physical nourishment. How else can we explain the ways he often sat at table with others to share a meal? Jesus knew we get hungry. We need physical bread. Yet, Jesus pushes us deeper than our physical needs. He identifies himself with bread to help the crowd gathered that day know he was their source for life. Jesus is life for us, too. Everytime we look upon the cross we know his body has been blessed, broken and given to us so that the deepest longings of our lives will be satisfied.

As we move through the weeks of Lent a number of our congregation’s members are involved in a study based on the “I am” saying of Jesus. An example of one of these sayings is when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” There’s a backstory at work here that helps us experience the deeper meaning of what Jesus reveals about himself. Time machines aren’t a real thing, of course, except the bible makes it possible for us to travel back through the generations. In the bible, and especially in the stories of Jesus, we find a beautiful capacity to transcend the limitations of a particular time and space. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” he connects himself to something that happened far back in time. “I am...” he said and with those words we are carried back in time to an experience Moses had on a wilderness hillside. Let’s go back. One day, as Moses was tending his flock of sheep, he saw a bush on fire. The bush was burning but it was not destroyed. (Exodus 3: 1-14) As the fire burned, the voice of God spoke to Moses and he knew he was standing on holy ground. God called Moses to lead the people from slavery into a life of freedom. Moses was terrified at the thought. How could he take on a mission like that? What authority did he have to represent God’s purpose in the lives of the people? In the fire’s glow and having kicked off his sandals to honor of the sacredness of the moment, Moses said, “Who are you? What is your name? Who shall I say is sending me to led the people toward a new life?” God says, “I am. This is my name. I am who I am. Tell the people you know me. I am.” This is the event that connects to Jesus the day he was confronted by the hungry crowd. That day he invited the people, and his words invite us this day, to move beyond the limitations of the world and the boundaries of the particular moment. “I am the bread of life.” In him we know God. In him we are on a first name basis with our creator. Because of his life, death and resurrection, Jesus is God’s presence for us. He’s not only our bread, he’s our burning bush. There’s a fire in him that becomes the light in us. He fills us with the presence of God and this is why he can say, “Those who come to me will never be hungry.”

In the book of our Lenten Study that I’ve mentioned, the author, whose name is Rob Fuquay, writes about the difference between being full and being satisfied. Our lives are full of lots of things. As an example, the author writes that our lives are full of communication. Technology constantly delivers news, political commentary, work emails, headline feeds, Twitter blasts and all kinds of other digital noise. Our lives are full of information and this, and many other things that fill up our time and energy, communicates the subtle but clear message that if we don’t have it all then our lives will somehow be less than they should be. Rob Fuquay writes that “our drive for fullness makes it hard to enjoy what we have.” And so, to a people who are chasing after fullness, Jesus offers satisfaction. Jesus offers not wholeness not fullness. Jesus is the bread of life because through him we find God, and when our

lives are centered in God our experience in this world is just as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 23, "I shall not want." Jesus centers us in God and when we are full of God all of our other needs and wants find they place and their purpose.

As you think about the difference between fullness and satisfaction in your own life, let me share something I've been thinking about regarding this. In order for us to receive the bread of life that is Jesus we must first have some space, some emptiness, in us for Jesus to fill. There is a place in the bible, in the writings of the early church, where the first believers described the way Jesus makes God known to us. We find the words in the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians. (Phil. 2: 5-11) There it says that even though Jesus was of God he "emptied" himself, and out of that emptiness God filled him so he could become for us the way to life. When Jesus tells us he is the bread of life he doesn't want to be in competition with everything else that fills us up. He wants us to be empty enough so that he can fill us with the blessings of God.

In this way, the season of Lent invites us to become empty, to let go of the things that clutter our lives so that there is space for the bread of life to fill us and satisfy our souls. The challenge is to figure out how we can get empty enough for God to fill us up. I don't have the final answer to that but I do suggest a place to start. We become empty enough for God to fill us when there is less of "me" in my life. Here's a way this can happen. One of the things of this world we are so full of is conflict and debate. The United Methodist Church has certainly experienced that through the deeply conflicting result of its recent General Conference regarding issues of human sexuality. In the midst of these kinds of debates we are always full of our own positions and our own ways of thinking. It's hard not to put ourselves at the center of it all because that's what fills our thinking most of the time. What if you and I asked God to help us put less of ourselves at the center so that more of God could fill that space? If the bread of life had space to fill us than we can be nourished even more by God's love, grace, comfort and peace. Instead of filling our minds with contentious debate and decisions that exclude others, we can be so filled with God there is more and more capacity within us to widen the circle of Christ's embrace. Jesus emptied himself so he could be filled with God and when we do the same the priorities of our lives are nourished by God's embrace which includes the whole world.

Well, are you hungry? I mean, are you really hungry? Is there an empty place in you that longs for God? Jesus is the bread of life. May we take him into ourselves so that we are not only satisfied but become one with him.