

“Filling Up on Bread”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

John 6:22-35

June 18, 2017 - Second Sunday after Pentecost

On any given Saturday morning, between the months of April and November, I am approximately 78% bread. I am more bread than human. My blood type is gluten-positive. I am the Pillsbury Dough Pastor. This is because Amber and I frequent the Pepper Place Farmers’ Market on Saturdays, and we inevitably stop and purchase a still-warm loaf of delicious bread, and we devour it with reckless abandon. And yet, we still long for the bread we ate when we lived in Germany, the perfect little *brötchen* that seemed to fall from the sky.

I grew up in the land of bagels and pizza. On Saturday mornings, my dad used to take the dog with him to make a run to the deli and pick up the most amazing poppy seed rolls. When we had birthday or graduation celebrations, a six-foot hero sandwich was often the centerpiece of the table. And yet, without a hint of irony, anytime we went to a restaurant, my parents would scold us children to not eat more than one slice of bread from the basket, so that we wouldn’t “fill up on bread.”

If I had been one of the five thousand Jesus had fed the previous day, I too would have gone looking for the guy who’d made bread multiply. I too might have scouted any boats passing by on the Sea of Galilee for a sign of the man or his friends.

When they can’t find him, they pour onto a boat and head across to Capernaum, Peter’s hometown. When they finally find Jesus, he does that Jesus thing, where he doesn’t answer their question. They want to know when he sailed. He replies that they’re only looking for him because they got stuffed with bread. He tells them not to work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.

All right, they’re intrigued. So they ask what they need to do in order to be doers of God’s work, and he replies with a laundry list of one: “believe in him who God has sent.”

The crowd stays with him, but they’re skeptical. Perhaps this is the new king, like David. Perhaps this is the new prophet, like Moses. But they’re going to need some proof. They want a sign. They want what their ancestors had — a miracle that they can consume, like the manna Moses gave in the wilderness.

John the Gospel writer would never have let it happen, but we could all understand if, at the suggestion that he do a sign akin to miraculous bread, Jesus pulled his hair and screamed into the closest pillow. He had literally fed a crowd of thousands the evening before with two fish and five loaves of bread.

But, Jesus being Jesus, he instead pivots and points out that the manna in the wilderness did not come from Moses, but from God. And he adds that God sends bread from heaven to give life to the world. And the crowd is entranced and asks for this life-giving bread — this nectar of the gods, this mystical miracle food. And Jesus has them right where he wants them: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

You see, this miraculous feeding the day before was not about filling up on bread. This public sign of hospitality and abundance and providence was, in the end, about *who Jesus is*.

He is the bread of life. And a large Judean crowd and your preacher only hear: “Bread!” Bread is lovely and wonderful. And it sustains us. We need to eat. But there is more to life than bread. There is more to being God’s people than saying, “Please drop some bread from the sky, or make some appear, or multiply it or whatever — we’re not picky. Just send the bread, please.” If we are fixated on ordinary bread, we miss what is being truly offered to us. We miss the bread of life. We miss never being hungry or thirsty again.

I think Jesus is frustrated with the crowd that Sea-stalks him because they expect so little. They want more bread. They want to see a magic trick. They want to know how he moves around. He fed the crowd as a sign of life. He fed the crowd to show them that hunger could be ended. When God sent manna in the desert, perhaps God was disappointed that the people could understand freedom and understand manna, but they could not seem to understand that the very same God who provided freedom and manna would love them and provide for them and bring them into a milk and honey-laden land.

We have no trouble asking God for parking places and for place-kickers to split the uprights. We are, of course, willing to ask for God’s help when illness strikes or danger lurks. But the bigger the prayer, the more cautious we sometimes get. We wouldn’t want to be too audacious.

Except Christ is pretty audacious. He says “I am the bread of life,” not, “You can gladly thank me Tuesday for a hamburger today.” He says “I am the bread of life,” not “I am the bread of this afternoon. Check back tomorrow.”

The gospel comes into our lives and surprises us like this. We’ve got everything in good working order, and then these audacious promises of life everlasting show up on Sunday morning. And that’s hard, because from noon on Sunday through 9 a.m. the following Sunday, we’ve been out there dealing with pain and disappointment and frustration and crud and we’ve done a pretty nice job of handling it on our own. Haven’t we?

We gather and we hear these promises and we ask only for bread, because the world has taught us that getting our hopes or expectations up is a recipe for disaster. And that is how we end up with a world that settles for bread. We are okay with just getting by and consuming a meal. So we don’t ask for justice, we just ask for security. We don’t ask for dreams to be fulfilled, we just ask to make it to Friday. We don’t ask for hope, we just ask for water. We see people who truly need bread and water in order to live, and we do our level best to nourish them, but we aren’t audacious enough to ask why they hunger and thirst. Hélder Câmara was a Roman Catholic archbishop in Brazil during that nation’s military regime in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.. He was once quoted as saying, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”

Expecting too little from God and from ourselves leads us to being...nice. My people may know what they’re doing with pizza and bagels, but they’re not known for being nice. Y’all are. But that’s just a surface-level distinction, I’m here to tell you. With low expectations, we strive to get through daily life by being nice. Well, Jesus never said “Blessed are the nice.” And I think Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

would all laugh at the thought that Jesus was particularly *nice*.

We can be nice to people and still judge them. We can be nice to a person in distress, and leave them in distress. We can be nice to people who are different from us, and then go home and think, “They get what they deserve.” We can be nice to young black men, and remain unfazed when they continue to be killed.

Jesus wasn’t particularly nice. But he was intensely compassionate. I know I’ve pointed this out before, but the word compassion breaks down to “com-passion” — “suffering with.” And then there’s “companion” — “breaking bread with.” Christ suffers with us. Christ breaks bread with us. The bread of life was broken for us.

It wasn’t niceness when my bagel and pizza-loving people acted heroically as their city was in terrifying chaos on 9/11. Those police officers and firefighters and emergency workers weren’t interested in being *nice* as they rushed back into the smoldering buildings. And within weeks of arriving in Alabama, I saw people here drop their Southern smiles and grab shovels and work gloves and show audacious compassion to their companions in Tuscaloosa and other tornado-ravaged communities.

This October marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther commented that the whole of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection are summed up in the two words we will hear when our bread is broken shortly: “for you.”

We often join the crowd in expecting only the bread. Sometimes we’ll ask for the magic trick, as if God were a genie. And how does our God respond? With mercy in the place of judgment. With love in the place of condemnation. With grace in the place of punishment. With vulnerability in the place of power. With God’s own self in the place of magic tricks — bread broken and a cup poured out, for you.¹

As we give thanks to God for our daily bread, and for the bread of the Lord’s Supper, and for the bread that fills our houses, let us keep our prayers audacious. It is not bread we seek, O God, but an end to our hunger and thirst. Amen.

¹ David Lose: <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-10-b-the-surprise-of-our-lives>