

June 3rd 2018 Communion

Scriptures:

Exodus 16:31-35

Psalm 78:12-25

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 6:25-48

“The bread of life.”

“Our lives are a journey
 from the weakness of the newborn child we once were
 to the weakness of the old person we will become.
 Our lives are a journey of growth
 from ignorance to wisdom,
 from selfishness to self-giving,
 from fear to trust,
 from guilt feelings to inner liberation,
 from lack of self-esteem to self-acceptance.

We human beings do not possess life.
 We receive life in our fragile bodies.
 And this life grows, develops, and deepens
 as long as we are nourished.
 Without food, we wither and die.
 What is true of our physical life is also true of our life in the Spirit.
 We need to be nourished.
 We need physical nourishment, intellectual nourishment and nourishment
 for the heart.”

So writes Jean Vanier in his opening to his thoughts on John 6.

And the last few lines in particular ring true for John 6.

“What is true of our physical life is also true of our life in the Spirit.
 We need to be nourished.
 We need physical nourishment, intellectual nourishment and nourishment
 for the heart.”

Most of us are very good with the first one ---- physical nourishment.

Many of us are pretty good with the second one ----- intellectual nourishment.

But fewer and fewer are any good at the last one --- nourishment of the heart --- or as Vanier says in the line before life in the Spirit --- or nourishment in the Spirit.

The first one ---- we all know if we don't eat --- nourish ourselves ---- feed our bodies ---- we will become sick and ultimately die.

We've all got that one figured out to some degree ---- or we'd already be six feet under by now ---- deceased --- past history.

Intellectual nourishment --- to some degree or another we've wrestled with this one too ---- we don't just like the same books and movies as we did when we were kids --- yes we may still like some of the same ones but we've also added more --- our tastes change ---- we grow --- we add things into our lives that feed nurture and challenge us intellectually.

But what about spiritual nourishment.

What about spiritual nourishment ---- beyond just the fact that we need it ---- how have we come understand our spiritual needs and how to feed them?

How do you feed your self spiritually?

How do you identify how and when you need to grow spiritually?

The truth is we usually don't look after this part --- God does.

When it comes to spiritual needs and spiritual nourishment things are not at all the same as physical and intellectual needs and nourishment.

Much of the time we can self determine --- and self regulate when it comes to physical nourishment ----- and much of the time we can self determine and self regulate when it comes to intellectual nourishment.

But when it comes to spiritual nourishment ---- not so much.

The Bible --- over and over gain emphatically says that when it comes to our spiritual development we need help ----- lots and lots of help.

Left to our own devices people in the Bible mess it up over and over and over again.

Put another way ----- there is no evidence in scripture for any kind of faithful self regulation when it comes to spiritual matters --- particularly spiritual growth.

God reveals ways forward --- God reveals direction ---- because He knows infinitely well that over and over and over again left to ourselves we simply cannot do it alone --- we simply cannot discover the way forward on our own --- otherwise He wouldn't have needed to come in Christ.

Jesus received such a poor reception precisely because most people felt that they didn't need any kind of spiritual direction or guidance from Him.

They knew how to feed their bodies --- they knew how to feed their minds -- -- and they also believed they knew how to feed their souls.

Jesus came and radically redefined just about everything people thought they knew about God and their spiritual needs and life.

And I think it's still --- just as it was when Jesus walked the earth ---- I think it is still far too easy to domesticate ---- and tame --- and water down ---- the challenging --- inspirational --- startling ---- and arresting message of Jesus Christ.

“I am the bread of life.” --- Jesus says today ---in verse 35 from John 6.

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

These are pretty powerful words --- and they are profoundly challenging words as well.

These words would have been arresting to a Jewish audience --- they would have stopped them in their tracks.

We began today with ----

“Our lives are a journey
 from the weakness of the newborn child we once were
 to the weakness of the old person we will become.
 Our lives are a journey of growth
 from ignorance to wisdom,
 from selfishness to self-giving,
 from fear to trust,
 from guilt feelings to inner liberation,
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 And this life grows, develops, and deepens
 as long as we are nourished
 Without food, we wither and die.
 What is true of our physical life is also true of our life in the Spirit.
 We need to be nourished.
 We need physical nourishment, intellectual nourishment and nourishment
 for the heart.”

Our lives are a journey.

And as Christians to understand our lives as spiritual journey at some point
 or another we have to familiarize ourselves with the Exodus.

The Exodus the preeminent journey of the people of God ---- from slavery to
 liberation --- from freedom to faithfulness --- from being under human rule
 to being under divine rule.

The Exodus --- the journey of the people of God out of Egypt to the
 Promised Land --- under the guidance of God through Moses --- rests at the
 heart of our faith.

And a key to understanding the Exodus is the bread the manna that God
 provided on their journey --- for 40 years.

For 40 years they lived on daily bread --- manna --- as we heard in our call
 to worship.

This Exodus ---- this march through the desert became such a valued and treasured story for the Hebrew people --- it was told and re-told --- over and over again --- generation after generation --- such that it was not possible to speak of the people of God without also at some point hearing of this miraculous journey.

And on this journey --- God provided “manna” --- bread from heaven.

And over and over again ---- indeed on a daily basis --- the Exodus journey included this miraculous feeding scene --- where each and every day God provided the bread they need just for that day --- except Saturday where he provided enough for 2 days – but each day the bread they needed just for that day appeared miraculously from heaven.

For many Jews the giving of the manna --- the provision of bread in the desert is the miracle par excellence in the Bible.

Indeed many Rabbis taught that the Messiah would prove His authority by replicating this miracle.

“You’ll know it’s the Messiah if He can make bread come --- you’ll know it’s the Messiah if manna --- bread comes from heaven.”

Jesus feeding 5,000 people --- manna --- bread from heaven --- just prior to our passage --- would have been an arresting image harkening back to the days of the Exodus --- and the dessert and the manna.

It would have been a huge sign --- there would have been some people thinking things like ---- “Wait a minute here ---- he just brought down manna --- bread from heaven --- he just might be the Messiah!” ---- this would not have gone unnoticed.

And then Jesus takes it even further and refers to Himself as the bread of life ----- this would have had some of the leaders on the edge of the seat.

There is absolutely nothing usual or rote or normal about this day ---- flags would have been going up in the leader’s minds as Jesus did what He did and said what He said.

And so John 6 ----- feeding 5,000 people just before our passage for today --
- manna bread from heaven --- on this hillside --- powerful imagery ---
powerful act of God through Jesus.

Just as the redeemer caused manna to fall from heaven in the desert --- so the
redeemer again was providing manna to fall from heaven.

Familiar yes --- but then Jesus throws a wrench or a twist into their
understanding --- challenge --- growth --- new perspective.

The Jewish imagery of manna --- bread from heaven --- was this.

There was a treasury of manna --- that opened and closed with Moses --- by
God in the desert.

Open the gates and out comes the manna --- close the gates and the manna
ceases to fall.

And along come Jesus --- who not only opens --- re-opens and close the
heavenly manna treasury like Moses --- the greatest of all the prophets ----
but now it isn't just about bread falling from heaven --- Jesus Himself drops
out and down from heaven.

Jesus claims to be --- and is the manna from above.

Jesus doesn't just provide the manna --- re-open the treasury from heaven.

He Himself comes out of the treasury --- He Himself is the manna --- He
Himself is the very bread.

This is huge --- manna from heaven --- the exodus Egypt ----- manna from
heaven --- here today is --- 5,000 plus people.

But even huger than this parallel is Jesus saying He Himself is the very
manna itself.

It would have blown their minds --- it would have been arresting for Jesus to
make these kinds of claims.

When was the last time --- you were arrested by something that Jesus said?

When was the last time you were arrested as you thought about Jesus Christ?

When was the last time Jesus took something familiar to you and transformed it into something new and took you deeper into His heart?

Right after Jesus says this --- “I am the bread of life” ---- what happens?

Verse 41 has the answer --- “At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

This was just too much to take --- so they begin to grumble.

They grumbled here when Jesus produced bread from heaven --- they grumbled here when Jesus said I am the bread of life ---- and it was the very same thing in the desert when the bread came down --- the people grumbled.

There is a great and powerful parallel here in John 6 with the Exodus story -- -- journey --- manna --- bread --- grumbling ---- and then there is the walking on water too.

Just before Jesus refers to Himself as the bread of life here in John 6 --- what has He just finished doing? ---- the answer ---- walking on water.

John 6 --- 16-24 is all about Jesus walking on water.

At the very beginning of John 6 he feeds 5,000 --- and then he walks on water ----- again a reference to the Exodus --- remember the people walk through the water to safety --- they walk on the bottom of the Red Sea --- that is their walking on water --- walking through water moment.

Those familiar with the Exodus story ---- those paying attention to what was happening here right before their eyes ---- those theologically astute ---- would have been on high alert.

You know in the movies when the secret service men --- turn quickly and push in their ear piece because they’ve just picked up or been told something that is crucial and alarming --- well that’s what many Jews would have been doing in John 6 --- bread from heaven --- grumbling --- walking on water.

And it just gets richer --- and Jesus just keeps on going deeper.

Jesus didn't just replicate the miracle that Moses was a part of --- manna in the desert ---- Jesus claims to be the very miracle itself --- the very bread itself.

And there was absolutely no framework in Judaism for a human speaking this ---- "I am the bread of life kind of talk."

I bring the bread of life for sure --- but this --- "I am" --- language referring to a person was unheard of.

It's not by mistake that Jesus uses the phrase --- "I am" here ----- this is His first of 7 --- "I am" --- statements --- all from and only from John's Gospel.

1--- I am the bread of life --- the first one here today in our passage.

2 --- I am the light of the world.

3 --- I am the gate.

4 --- I am the Good Shepherd ---- we heard a bit about this one a few weeks ago.

6 --- I am the way the truth and the life --- we also heard about this one recently too.

5 --- I am the resurrection and the life.

7 ---- I am the true vine.

And Jesus employs this --- "I am" phrasing intentionally ---- he is declaring His divinity --- He is declaring that not only is he providing the bread but He is the bread.

We first hear the phrase "I am" --- where ---- with Moses the burning bush -- -- and it is God self revealing Himself just as Jesus is self-revealing himself using the exact same phrase --- "I am".

Remember God speaks out of the burning bush in exodus saying “I am” --- or “I am who I am”.

Moses asks God who shall I say sent me --- what is your name --- and God responds with --- “I am who I am.” --- tell them “I am” sent you.

Jesus saying “I am” ---- “I am the bread of life” --- would have rung all kinds of bells in people’s heads.

Jesus was taking much of what many wise old Jews would have known --- the Exodus ----- manna, feeding people with bread from heaven --- walking on water ---- using the phrase “I am” ----- and claiming them for Himself.

He was self revealing Himself in powerful ways ---- taking that which they knew about God and applying it to Himself.

Without stating it outright He was staking His claim at His divine nature.

On that hillside Jesus was also pointing to this very meal that we have set before us today.

Jesus is evoking both imagery of the past ---- Passover ---- the meal of the past --- and imagery of the meal to come --- what we now call Communion.

And the most important thing for Jesus isn’t the bread itself ---- the manna -- ---- the physical nourishment.

For Jesus the new element is the Holy Spirit --- the spiritual nourishment.

Jesus is not just repeating a symbolic meal --- manna in the desert --- manna on the hillside.

It’s a new meal that Jesus is talking about and He is it.

It is a spiritual meal.

Taking that which the people were familiar with but then also making it one step closer to God ---- as He is God Himself.

Listen again to the interaction at the end of our passage for today --- picking it up at verse 32 from John 6.

“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.

For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

And then they reply ----- “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

Then Jesus responds ----

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.

But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.

All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Jesus isn’t just replicating something Moses did.

Jesus isn’t just talking about food for the belly.

Jesus isn’t just talking about food in this life.

He is talking about spiritual nourishment --- He’s talking about eternal life.

He doesn’t refer to himself as the bread **IN** life.

But as the bread **OF** life.

He isn’t just bread for this life --- He is the bread of his life --- this life and the next.

“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” ---- He says in verse 40.

Jesus is saying to the people it is not what you think that is important.

It isn’t just about the bread ---- it’s about He who gave the bread --- it’s about He who is the bread --- it’s about the presence of God ---- and I am it.

They no longer had to look for God --- He was standing in their midst.

Jesus isn’t just another character in the Jewish narrative --- another character in the great story of the people of God.

He is so profoundly different than anyone we have ever met ---- and the truth is when we probe the depths of His character and nature --- if we are honest with ourselves --- and make ourselves secondary even if just for a minute --- if we can make ourselves secondary --- even if just for something like a second ----- we will see just how powerful and beautiful and awesome --- and true and good He is ----- and we will be changed.

God knew that left to themselves the people would never be able to truly see His nature --- His beauty and goodness and truth.

God knew --- God experienced --- it in Eden --- He already knew and He already saw --- that we always want more and that the minute someone else comes along with what seems like a good idea we’ll fall for it --- slip up make a mistake --- the snake made it sound so good --- Eve couldn’t resist.

God knows that left to ourselves we can’t self regulate.

So He stopped sending teachers --- or more appropriately in addition to sending teachers ----- He stepped down Himself in Jesus Christ.

Before --- when the people needed bread --- God opened up the heavenly treasury of manna and dropped some down.

Now ---- things have changed ---- instead of just opening up the heavenly treasury of bread.

God is dropping down out of the treasury Himself in Jesus Christ.

Too often we water down the radical claim of Christ.

We speak of Jesus as a friend --- and a leader and a teacher ----- and of course He is all of these things but He is also the sovereign Lord of the universe --- one without peer.

He isn't just like bread --- He doesn't just provide bread --- He is bread --- He is the bread --- and He is the bread of life --- this life and the next.

I think I've shared this story before about a friend of mine --- a Christian ---- - who took a friend of his --- not a Christian --- to a Christian conference.

And when it was over -----my friend said to his non believing friend ---- "So what did you think?"

And he replied --- "I think what I liked most is that the keynote speaker right from the very get go --- didn't just present Jesus as a regular guy --- or incredible teacher --- but instead referred to Him right off the hop as very God Himself – amazing ---- without peer – in a category all of his own."

"Too often" --- he said --- "You Christians try to present Jesus as just another guy --- and when you do I feel like you're kind of soft soaping us non believers into getting to know Jesus as just a regular guy --- when in actuality you don't think he was a regular guy at all."

Jesus isn't just another ordinary guy --- someone who just happened to do some pretty incredible things.

He is without parallel ---- He is in a category of His own.

And when we talk about Him --- and when we share Him --- and when we think about Him --- we need to present Him as something else --- and then some.

He isn't just another character in the history of the Jewish people --- He isn't just another somebody in the history of the world.

He is so profoundly different that anyone else such that when we probe the depths of who He is --- what He did --- and is doing --- if we are anything less than arrested into a kind of holy awe than we have totally missed who He actually is.

As theologian and John scholar Karoline Lewis said --- “As soon as we are comfortable or complacent with God moving into the neighbourhood ----- we ignore the radical --- unbelievable claim of the Word made flesh.”

Put another way ---- in a way fitting for the day we hear Jesus saying “I am the bread of life” ----- as soon as we think that Jesus just provides the bread and isn’t also the very bread itself --- we ignore the radical --- almost unbelievable claim of the Lordship of Christ.”

There is nothing rote --- there is nothing simple --- there is nothing mundane --- there is nothing regular or ordinary about Jesus Christ.

There is nothing rote --- there is nothing simple --- there is nothing mundane about this table set before us.

Today is the second Sunday after Pentecost.

Pentecost that day of wind and flame ---- and souls on fire.

Last week as I led worship with a colleague at her invitation --- and thank you to the elders for allowing me the opportunity to go ---- especially Andrea, Sheila, and John.

While I was at Melville PC in Scarborough there was a young woman --- their music director ---- and she sang a solo of the song by Third Day --- called ---- Soul on Fire --- Soul on Fire.

And as she sang I thought --- “She isn’t just singing that song --- she isn’t just singing those words --- her soul is on fire for Jesus.” --- you could feel God come into the room through her authenticity and sincerity.

That’s what God wants of us to be ----- souls on fire for Him --- authentic and sincere.

Jesus isn't just another character in the narrative of the great love story between God and His creation --- He is the sovereign Lord of the universe --
- and He came to set our souls on fire.

God, I'm running for Your heart
I'm running for Your heart
Till I am a soul on fire

Lord, I'm longing for Your ways
I'm waiting for the day
When I am a soul on fire
Till I am a soul on fire

God, I'm running for Your heart
I'm running for Your heart
Till I am a soul on fire

Lord, I'm longing for Your ways
I'm waiting for the day
When I am a soul on fire
Till I am a soul on fire

Lord, restore the joy I had
I have wandered, bring me back
In this darkness, lead me through
Until all I see is You

God, I'm running for Your heart
I'm running for Your heart
Till I am a soul on fire

Lord, I'm longing for Your ways
I'm waiting for the day
When I am a soul on fire
Till I am a soul on fire

And on the song goes.

Jesus didn't just provide something --- bread for the journey.

He is the very bread --- He is the very journey.

And we cannot go it without Him.

And if we probe the depths of His character and His nature ---- there is something there deep in His being that will set us on fire for Him and His way.

He is all we need.

He is the bread of life.

May our souls find rest in Him.

And may our souls be on fire for Him.

Amen.