

The Bread of Life

July 28, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: John 6: 1-21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

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*Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*

A few weeks ago, I was visiting with a dear friend in the Pacific Northwest. As it would happen, my visit fell over the Fourth of July. And when I arrived – just a couple of days before the holiday, I found out that we were going to be hosting the neighbor's Fourth of July cookout.

Now those of you who follow Peter and I on social media know that cooking is one of my loves, so in a way this wasn't a big deal – cooking a meal for a gathering of folks. Only, we didn't really know how many people would show up – somewhere between 15-20.

So we got to work. By the end of the day, all who came ate their fill and were well satisfied. And still, this question posed by Jesus resonates – *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?* Or in our case, *how can we prepare enough that all will be able to eat?*

In this morning's reading, we hear this miraculous, if familiar story about the feeding of the multitude. At first glance, our Gospel reading seems like it could be a continuation from last week's text – for last week, like this week, there were crowds following Jesus.

Also, you might have noticed that there was a section of text left out from the Gospel reading from Mark last week. In the section that the lectionary left out was another version of the feeding of the 5,000 – as well as a fearful incident with the disciples in their boats at night when Jesus appears to come over the water. So, some striking parallels.

However, even though they appear similar on the surface, there are very different currents moving underneath these two texts. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the narrative moves quickly from one passage to another – portraying Jesus as a healer and a Wisdom teacher. He meets, confronts, he heals and teaches everybody – from the religious authorities to the crowds, and to his own students, the disciples.

But John's Gospel is a very different account. The Jesus of John's Gospel is often referred to as "Divine Revealer" – the human face of God, if you will. John's Gospel is also often known as the Book of Signs because this text presents seven signs, as they are called. Signs that point to who Jesus is and what his mission is all about. Signs like: turning water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, cleansing the Temple, Healing the Nobleman's child, Healing the Man who has been sitting beside the Bethesda pool for 38 long years.... The list goes on.

The feeding of the 5000 that we heard in today's text is the fifth of the seven signs.

So, the crowd is following Jesus – looking for a sign, as the text says, when Jesus asks this question of one of his students: *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*

Seems reasonable enough – the crowds, perhaps the hour. Only there's a word that makes this question really interesting. In Jesus' native Aramaic, the word that is translated for bread, *lachma*, can mean physical food. And it can also mean spiritual

nourishment, understanding. After all, the root of this word, *lachma* is *hma* – a feminine-gendered word in Aramaic that can mean *wisdom*.

So, this question – *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?* – can operate at many different levels of being – from the physical, material needs for the sustenance of life to the spiritual wisdom, insight, and understanding that is needed in *this* moment – this living moment that is always now.

And there's always enough available for our sustenance. The astonishing quantity of *lachma* that is left over can point to this – that an abundance of wisdom, understanding, deep nourishment that is always available to us.

I won't go too much further into this, because the Bread of Life discourse will unfold over the next several weeks, so there will be plenty of time for further reflection. However, there's one other bit that I *do want* to hold up for our reflection here this morning. The text has Jesus saying a line that is rich with possible meaning: "It is I; do not be afraid."

As I was saying earlier, Jesus as presented in John's Gospel is often referred to as the Divine Revealer. And part of this understanding comes from the *I AM* statements of Jesus throughout the Gospel of John. While it's completely legitimate to hear the *I AM* statements in terms of who and what Jesus is revealing, the Aramaic holds up another possibility. In Aramaic, the word is *Ina'na*. And this word, *Ina'na* can also be translated as "the I inside of the I" or "the I am" – in other words, this essence – who we really are deep down inside that can get covered up and obscured by the sways of ego and personality – but it is this part that is actually connected to, and a constitutive part of all that is – the entire Cosmos right here, within us all – making us One. So, the line might better be: *I AM, do not be afraid*.

The second half of this line – the "*do not be afraid*" part could also mean something deeper (as the Aramaic scholar Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz posits in *Revelations of the Aramaic Jesus*): "do not let yourselves be weakened or divided by a mere appearance, something that passes away." Or to put it more simply, "Remember – connect your small self to the only Self [to the Great I AM]. This will sort out for you the question of what's real and what's not."

The nourishment, the understanding, the remembering that is offered in our passage today exists on all of these possible levels – the food that we need for our bodies and the food that we need for much deeper nourishment. Likewise, the connection from this I AM to the Great I AM... it is always here for us to sense our way into.

For what do we hunger? For what do we hunger in our own lives – from the food that we eat to meaning and purpose – to insight, connection, understanding. For what do we hunger?

For what do we hunger in our world? Justice and equality, a world in which the basic human needs of all people can be regarded – with dignity and respect... a world in which (thank God!) our political discourse can finally be inspiring – speaking of the kind of nation that we do want and not just what we don't want.

For what do we hunger? And for what do we hunger on all of these possible levels... *and* are we willing to see that there is abundance? Are we willing to see that there is abundance deep within and all around so that we *can feast*, we can be nourished and satisfied in body, mind, heart, and being?

Thinking back to the Fourth of July party a few weeks ago, I know that those who came were hungry – for burgers, potato salad, watermelon gazpacho... Perhaps they, we... were hungry for something else as well – shared experience, connection, community... for a deeper sort of bread.

And within each of us is the same – hunger for ourselves – hunger for the needs of our bodies, of our communities, our country and world. And there is a deeper hunger – the hunger that dwells deep within – to live from *this I AM* within that longs for connection, nay... communion... with the Great *I AM*. Amen.

