

Bread from Heaven

August 25, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Kate Layzer

Texts: John 6:35, 41-51

“I am the bread of life.”

The setting is the Passover, that solemn time of year when Jews remember that long-ago journey out of Egypt, through the barren wilderness. There they came face to face with their helplessness and hunger, and there God fed them with manna, bread from heaven, each day enough for their needs.

Just as in the original Passover journey, these scenes from John 6 take place in the wilderness, with crowds gathered, waiting to be fed, and tension in their air. In Jesus’ day there was always tension in the air in Israel around Passover time. People would remember how God had led their people out of Egypt. They would ask themselves, if God could free them from Pharaoh, why not Caesar?

And so, in John’s telling, a peaceful hillside meal soon begins to rumble with revolutionary spirit.

Is Jesus a second Moses? Is this the one they’ve been waiting for? Jesus slips away quickly before the crowds can take him by force and make him their king.

They catch up with him the next day, and this is where our passage picks up – with the crowd demanding that Jesus repeat the miracle of the loaves. “Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness,” they tell him. “Give us a sign that you are the one we’ve waited for.”

Of course, the sign has already been given, with yesterday’s feeding miracle. But that’s the nature of desire: one loaf is never enough.

Or one achievement. Or one purchase. Or one victory. Or one compliment. Or one any of the countless other things we chase after, thinking, this will meet my hunger once and for all...

...only to feel empty again an hour later. If I just finish this degree... get promoted...meet the right person...

If I buy those shoes... order the fries... have another drink... watch one more episode...

If we could just elect the right candidate...!
the list is as bottomless as the emptiness we are trying to fill.

ADD TO CART >click<

BUY NOW >click<

Is there anything we can do, anything we can acquire, anything we can achieve, anything we can put on our credit card to fill that nagging emptiness inside?

Jesus knows our emptiness well. He knows us, because he's one of us.

He's hungered with us, ached with us, fasted with us, sat with us in our struggles.

And he knows that none of the things we crave or purchase or amass or consume can ever actually touch the hunger in our spirit. Not even regime change!

What Jesus has to offer is himself: God's love on human feet.

Only God can answer our loneliness and need. Only God can offer wholeness to our restless, patchwork hearts.

And only through hearts that have found their rest in God can our world can finally know peace.

This is the path Jesus invites us to be on with him: a new exodus, a new journey to freedom.

This time, Jesus himself will be the manna.

"He said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life.'" (Jn 6:32-34)

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14)

By now the crowd is seriously annoyed. They came looking for another miracle. They came looking for liberation from Rome. The world is messed up: They want practical solutions. What Jesus is saying isn't just unhelpful: To Jewish ears it sounds heretical, even idolatrous.

And perhaps even to some of us the idea that God could come this close to earth, the idea that God could make Godself present in one of us, flesh and blood like us, does sound more than a little outrageous. Not even a certain former president has dared to make that claim! (Yet.)

But if God wanted to draw near to us, as near as possible to our finite, mortal bodies and messy human lives... how else would God go about it then to actually become flesh and blood?

That's the mystery at the heart of the gospel of John, the claim that in Jesus, God has come that near.

It's not me you're seeking, Jesus tells the crowd. You're here because God is inviting you, drawing you to God's own heart.

Even if you don't know it's God you're seeking. Even you expected God to be different: sterner, maybe, or more warlike, or just holier and more removed.

...Have you felt that same longing in the presence of Jesus?

Whatever your beliefs about him, whatever your theology, whether you consider yourself Trinitarian, Unitarian, or just plain humanist – still, something has drawn you to this place, these stories, this kind of community.

So, if you too are offended that Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," that's okay. The bread is for all of us, no matter what beliefs we might hold about it. The power is in the bread, not in us.

The bread is the love and mercy and compassion of God, made known in Jesus our brother. It's the new life in the Spirit, poured out and multiplied for all to share.

In Jesus, God's yearning for us meets our yearning for God. As we return his gaze, as we feel his touch, we are invited to share God's own inner life of love in community.

"I am the Bread of Life." It makes sense that what we need most deeply can't be bought, bartered, or traded, but only received as a gift...putting all else aside, and making room in ourselves for the mystery that is God.

In John, when Jesus calls us to “believe in him,” I think this is what he means. He’s not saying we need to accept something as true, like a fact or a piece of logic. To believe, in John’s gospel, is more like to open one’s heart to. So that God can enter our lives and heal us, from the inside out.

When we pray, Give us this day our daily bread, of course we’re talking about real food: the manna our bodies need for today. But at the same time, just by praying, we are opening our hearts to receive the manna that is the divine life, flowing to us from Jesus’ way of mercy, compassion, and love.

Those gifts are bread for us all, even those of us who flinch at the thought of Jesus and God together in one body.

May we open our hearts to accept God’s love for us. And may our healing be for the healing of the world, now and forever. Amen.

