

I Am The Bread of Life
John 6:30 – 59
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2016

The Context: Feeding the Five Thousand

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.

We begin a new sermon series today. We will look at each of the seven “I am” statements of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of John. We begin with the first one recorded. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

It is important to know the context of this declaration by Jesus. Earlier in chapter 6 John tells us of the well-known story of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand. After this miracle, Jesus is approached by some who question him while he is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. As an aside, a first century synagogue in Capernaum has been excavated and partially restored. We can be reasonably confident that this was the place where this discussion took place.



Transition sentence.

People’s spiritual assumptions and questions do not change over time. The people in the ancient world were just like people in the modern world. They sense, rightly, that Jesus is God’s representative. They ask Jesus the same question many moderns would ask, “What does God require of us?”

What does God require of us?

²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

This is the natural human question: “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” The subject of the question is us: What must *we* do. God must require something of us. What is it that he requires? What do I have to do to please God? What is expected of me in order to be welcomed on the other side of death? What is the password that opens the gates of heaven?

As an aside, this is part of the appeal of the religion of Islam. If Muhammed were answering this question he would reply, *“To do the works of God you must do five things: 1) confess that there is no God by Allah (and that I, Muhammed, am his prophet; 2) pray five times each day; 3) give alms to the poor; 4) observe the fast during the holy month of Ramadan; and 5) if you have the financial resource to do so, make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Do these five things and you will be doing the works of God.”* In this respect, Islam is a very simple, straightforward religion. It is a religion where righteousness is achieved through your effort, by what you do. Do these five things and you are a good Muslim, doing the work of God.

However, Jesus answers the question differently. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” The **work** of God, according to Jesus, is not something we do, it is something we believe. The work of God is to have the right object of faith. We are not called to do great things for God. We are called to believe in Jesus of Nazareth. This is what God requires.

The response of the people with whom Jesus is talking is bold unbelief.

Bold unbelief

³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

It is human nature. They ask the question, “What do I have to do to please God?” Jesus answers the question, “Believe in me.” His hearers come back with another question, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you?” They ask, “What do we have to do?” Jesus tells them. And his hearers say, “Prove it.” They ask for a sign. They ask for a meal, like the manna that fed the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness of Sinai.

The world of Jesus day was filled with Messianic expectation. The people of Judah and Galilee could sense that the time was near when the Lord's Anointed, the heir to the Davidic throne, the Messiah, would be revealed. The popular belief at this time was that the Messiah would liberate the nation of Israel from foreign oppression and usher in a golden age of God's rule. A popular intertestamental book, Baruch, taught that one of the signs that would authenticate the arrival of the true Messiah would be his reinstatement of miracle of the manna. It is that belief that is behind the people's question to Jesus. “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ”

This request of Jesus is bold, unbelieving and ironic. It is ironic because the people are asking Jesus to produce manna in the wilderness and Jesus had just done so earlier in the chapter when he fed the five thousand with a few loaves and fishes.

This is a follow-up conversation because of that miracle. It is a bold request because the people are essentially asking Jesus to come out publicly and identify himself as the Messiah. At the same time, it is unbelieving because miracle of feeding the five thousand had already established Jesus' divine authority. They ask, but they do not believe. They ask for bread from heaven, and that was precisely that that Jesus had given to them in the multiplication of the loaves and fish. There was a profound spiritual blindness.

Their understanding of the coming of the Kingdom of God was thoroughly materialist. In verse 32, Jesus attempts to raise their vision from the horizontal to the vertical, from the earthy and materialist to the spiritual: "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. Jesus' hearers are thinking about literal bread. Jesus has in mind a spiritual reality – the bread of heaven. He tells them (verse 33): For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Jesus' hearers respond rightly saying, "Sir, give us this bread.

To this request Jesus replies with the first, and what may be the most difficult, of his seven majestic "I Am" statements in John's Gospel: "I am the Bread of Life."

The bread of heaven

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

What does Jesus mean when he claims to be The Bread of Life?

First, he is saying that he is God.

He is saying that he is God

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am

Exodus 3 tells us the story of God's call to Moses out of the Burning Bush. Moses and God are carrying a conversation and Moses asks God his name. This is God's reply (3:14)- God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Note the phrasing, 'I AM has sent me to you.' You and I cannot say "I am" in the same way that God says it to Moses. I cannot say "I am" and stop at that. I have to add an object to my declaration: "I am a pastor. I am a Green Bay Packer's fan. I am from New Jersey (but do not hold that against me)." God says "I am" and nothing more is needed. There is nothing contingent about God. He simply is. He is "I am."

When Jesus says "I am the bread of life" his emphasis in part echoes God's declaration to Moses. Jesus is claiming more for himself. He is explicitly affirming his office as Messiah. He is equating himself with God.

The first thing Jesus means in saying he is the bread of life is that he is claiming divine authority. The second is that he, Jesus, is the food, the nourishment of life.

He is saying that he is the food, the nourishment, of life

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread

The story is told that during World War 2 some German prisoners-of-war being held here in the United States, complained to Geneva Convention that their American captors were not giving them the required daily ration of bread. The Germans were used to heavy wheat and rye breads: to them, Wonder Bread was not bread at all.

We modern Americans have such abundance that we take bread, our daily bread, for granted. Ask an American who has lived overseas what they miss most in coming back to America, and a common to that question will be “bread.” The importance and centrality of bread can be woven into the culture and day to day life of a people. We Americans like bread. We are glad to eat it. But it is not often front and center in our thinking.

When Jesus says that he is the bread of life he is linking himself in the closest fashion to that which sustains the spirit, the spiritual life. Bread is at the center of physical life. Christ is at the center of spiritual life. He is the food that sustains the spirit.

Next, Jesus’ declaration to be the bread of life is a claim to exclusivity.

He is claiming exclusivity

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am *the* bread of life”

Jesus uses the definite article. “I am *the* bread of life” In the modern world, this claim by Jesus is an arena of great controversy and dispute. Jesus is not “a” bread of life; he is “the” bread of life. He is not one source of spiritual life among many. It is only from him, and from him alone, that men and women can obtain spiritual life. The exclusivity of the teaching of Jesus is a source of great consternation for many Americans, - especially our elites. Our elites in America today celebrate diversity, openness, and inclusivity. They believe that all religions point to God. They believe that all religions are heading in the same direction, they simply traveling different paths. There is much good in the philosophy and teaching of the Buddha, but Buddha does not offer the bread of life. The clarity and simplicity of Islam is very appealing; but the five pillars will not bring you to the bread of life.

Jesus declaration that he is the bread of life should be understood as an appeal by Jesus to his hearers. He is saying, to them, and to us, that longing, and spiritual emptiness, can be satisfied only by him. He is the bread of life.

Modern folk have a hard time with this statement and Jesus' hearers have a hard time with this statement. Jesus being the bread of life was a hard saying for the Jews.

Jesus being the bread of life was a hard saying for the Jews

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

His hearers take offence at his words. They object to what he says. They believe that Jesus is claiming too much for himself. They want to take Jesus down a peg or two. They say, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

One of the things that I love about Jesus Christ he speaks the truth. He says what needs to be said, even if it may cause offence. He is willing to hurt feelings and say challenging things in the pursuit of truth. If Jesus had had a public relations manager, at this point the PR guy would step forward and say, "Let me clarify Jesus' words. When he said he was the bread of life, he did not mean that literally. It was a figure of speech." Jesus would then say to his PR guy, "let **me** clarify what I meant." He then turns back to the crowd, and says (verse 51): I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." At this, Jesus' PR guy faints.

What does Jesus mean using the word flesh?

What does Jesus mean in using the word *flesh*?

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The use of the word "flesh" by Jesus is startling, even crude. Before we can understand what Jesus means, we must first correct a common error. Jesus is not making a reference to the Eucharist, communion or the Lord's Table. He is not referring to the bread we share together in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The normal New Testament word for Christ's presence in the bread of communion is "body" not "flesh." Jesus is saying something different here. What is it?

In verse 54, Jesus declares, Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. In the original Greek, the tense used by Jesus in this verse is aorist. The aorist tense is used to refer to actions completed once and for all. If Jesus was referring to communion, he would not have used the aorist tense, for communion is a repetitive celebration. It is something we do over and over again.

In these words, Jesus refers to something that will happen. Repeatedly in this chapter we are told that Jesus came down from heaven. Why did he come from

heaven? In a word, he came to die. He came to offer himself as a propitiation for human sin. The use of the word *flesh* is a reference to his passion. He gives his flesh for our redemption. The nails, the whipping, the crown of thorns, the piercing of his side, the excruciating pain of the crucifixion represent the giving of his flesh.

What does Jesus mean in asking to *eat* his flesh? Jesus Christ came to die for us. The invitation contained in this passage is to take Christ into our life, into our innermost being. Eating and drinking refer to participation in Christ. The promise is given that to those who do so, he will satisfy their deepest needs and give to them, in the last day, eternal life. Augustine of Hippo writes that this saying is enjoining us to "communicate in the sufferings of our Lord, and secretly and profitably treasure in our hearts the fact that his flesh was crucified and pierced for us." He sums up what he means with the phrase "Believe, and thou hast eaten."

We have seen what Jesus gives, himself, the bread of life. And we have seen how Jesus gives himself, as a sacrifice in his death, to purchase for us our redemption. But it remains to be asked, "Why does Jesus give himself, his life, as bread for the world?"

This phrase is repeated seven times in chapter 6 – why did Jesus come from heaven?

³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

It is striking that the concept that the Christ came down from heaven is repeated seven times in this chapter. Clearly Christ has come with a mission, with a purpose. But what is it? Why has Jesus come? In verse 38 we are told that he came to do the Father's will. In verse 39 we are told God's will is that Jesus should lose nothing of all that [God] has given me. The mission of Christ is to accept those whom God in his sovereignty draws to himself.

Men and women in sin face a life of slow self-destruction and finally death. It is not in our power to find salvation. In deed, we cannot, for sin for us is a life sentence to prison, its sure end is death. Our situation in life is similar to that of a man who purchased a white mouse as food for his pet snake. He dropped the mouse into the snake's cage, where the snake was sleeping in a bed of sawdust. That tiny mouse had a serious problem on its hands. What did he do? He quickly set to work covering the snake with sawdust chips. He continued until he had completely covered the sleeping snake. With that, the sleeping mouse apparently thought that he had solved his problem. But had he? Of course not. At any moment that snake might awaken and devour him whole.

So it is with sin in our lives. We may deny it. We may hide it. We may cover it up. But it may at any moment shake off its cover and eat us alive. As it happened, the solution for this poor mouse came from outside. Touched by the plight of the silly little mouse, the man took pity on it and removed it from the cage. The mouse's only hope lay in the graceful intervention of one who was outside.

God the Father gave Christ the mission. He had a plan, conceived in a past eternity, to rescue us, his creatures, whom he took pity on, from the looming threat of death. By the coming of Christ and his death, we might be men and women freed from the bondage of sin and death and grafted into Christ. In the words of that great hymn by Wesley, "And Can it Be?"

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off,
My heart was free.
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Why did Jesus Christ come into our world?

Why did Jesus Christ come into our world?

⁴⁴No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life.

He came to give himself for this world. In giving himself, we mean that he came to die. He offered himself as a ransom, a propitiation, a substitute for our sin. In doing so, he offers himself, the bread of life, to all who turn to him in faith believing.

I know of a young boy whose sister suffered from a very serious illness. It became clear that if she was to survive, she would need an operation. But, as they surgeons and medical staff at the hospital began the preparations for the surgery, they came to a disturbing discovery: this little girl had a very rare blood type. They knew that because of the nature of the operation she would need some blood to be transfused, but none was available. Quickly, they checked the blood types of her family, and found that her brother had the same type blood. The doctors and the parents sat the young boy down, to explain to him how ill his sister was, and that she needed blood, and that his was the only type of blood they could give her. Would he be willing to let them take his blood and give it to his sister? The little boy was a bit shaken by all of this, as you can imagine, but he paused, and said, "Yes. For my sister."

Because of the urgency of the situation they quickly brought him to a room where a nurse came in and began the procedure to remove a pint of blood. When she was done she sent the blood down the hall to the operating room where the surgery had already begun on the boy's sister. As the nurse was cleaning and straightening the room, the boy looked up and asked: "Nurse, when do I die?"

With those words the nurse realized that the little boy had thought that when they had asked him for his blood to save his sister, they were asking him to die. This little boy, motivated by the simple courage of love for his sister, was willing to give his blood, that she might live. The nurse took him in her arms and explained that no, he wasn't going to die, but because of him and his love, his sister would live.

When we say that Christ came into the world to save sinners, to say you and me. We are saying that he came to die. We marvel at the courage of this little boy, willing to die for his sister. But even more, we stand in awe of the Son of God, willing to enter our world to offer himself as the sacrifice, the bread of life, that we might know salvation.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

John 6: 25 - 59

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and

my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.