

“I Am the Bread of Life”
Exodus 16:11-15, John 6:24-35
First Sunday in Lent
February 10, 2008

“You must work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life.” John 6:27, New English Bible

Several years ago author by the name of Kinky Friedman—I’m not kidding, that’s really his name—wrote a novel entitled Elvis, Jesus, and Coca-Cola. It is a very politically incorrect murder mystery. You might get a glimpse of this guy’s thought process by the title of a country song he also wrote: “They Don’t Make Jews Like Jesus Anymore.” Catchy, huh? Anyway, woven into the plot of his novel, we find the reasoning behind the title. Kinky says that Elvis, Jesus, and Coca-Cola are the three most widely used proper names in the English language. He believes that they have also come to represent what he believes are the three greatest hungers in our culture. He writes that Elvis has come to represent our unending search for happiness. Watch any of Elvis’ movies and see if that is not true. He sings and shakes his way to happiness in every single one of them—especially those with Ann Margaret! Friedman also writes that Coca-Cola has come to signify our culture’s belief that we can purchase satisfaction. The world’s best-known trademark has come to serve as a symbol of that philosophy that says that meaning in life—or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say “the real thing”—can be bought. Why else do we see those long lines anytime the latest got-to-have-it item comes out? Why else will parents do things they would never do anyplace else when scrambling through the toy store aisles getting ready for Christmas? And then there is Jesus. Friedman says...well, let’s forget what Friedman says. What Jesus says is much more important. Let me show you what I mean.

It was the day after Jesus had fed the 5000. Completely amazed by what he had done, absolutely flabbergasted that from just five barley loaves and a couple of fish everybody ate their fill and had leftovers to boot, a portion of that crowd of 5000 began to look for Jesus. When they discovered early the next morning that neither Jesus nor his disciples were resting alongside the Sea of Galilee like they thought they would be, they frantically got into their boats and started searching for them. That crowd of still-amazed

people were finally able to locate him and the twelve way on the other side of the Sea. That's when they raced up to Jesus and asked, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

Now no one ever accused Jesus of being politically correct. I can't remember a time when he ever pulled a punch. He didn't do it this time either. Rather than answering their question, he looked at the crowd that had followed him to the other side of the Sea and said, "You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free." In other words, Jesus knew why they were there. As happens again and again in the Gospel of John, the people had misunderstood what had happened. Jesus knew that the crowd was seeking full bellies rather than full lives. He knew they wanted the comfort of what he provides, not the knowledge that he provides. They ate their fill of the food he had given the day before, but in so doing completely missed his message. And that is why Jesus told the crowd, "Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food that the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last."

Now before we go on, let me tell you that for the next several weeks, I want us to explore the "I am" sayings of Jesus for this year's Lenten study. The "I am" sayings are a very distinctive part of the Gospel of John. One author wrote that in these sayings "Jesus identifies himself with symbols that come from the common fund of ancient Near Eastern religious and human experience—for example, bread, life, light, truth. Through these common symbols, Jesus declares that people's religious needs and human longings are met in him."¹ I believe that through studying these familiar sayings we cannot only discover a fuller picture of Jesus, but a fuller picture of ourselves as well. They can help us to understand what we really need for that abundant, fully satisfied life for which everyone longs. And by looking at these sayings during this season of Lent, by trying to understand what Jesus is telling us, by remembering that he said, "I am the light of the world, the door of the sheep, the good shepherd, and the resurrection and the life," I

¹ Gail O'Day, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI, The Gospel of John, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1195 p. 601

believe that we can experience an Easter unlike any we have ever known. That which we will look at today is chronologically the first of the “I am” sayings found in John’s gospel. Jesus said to that crowd who had raced to see him, “I am the bread of life.” Let’s take a closer look.

But once again, before we do let me remind you that some time towards the end of the Stone Age, back when Fred and Barney were still living in Bedrock, bread was made for the very first time. Someone discovered that when wheat was ground into flour, mixed with water, and then made into a paste, it could be placed on a hot rock and baked into an edible substance that came to be called bread. It was rather flat and probably looked something like a tortilla. An eon or two later, somebody somehow discovered that when the foam from their favorite brew was mixed with that wheat paste and then cooked, that bread would rise. The loaf of bread, it seems, was born. Several more eons went by, and finally in 1912 Otto Frederick Rohwedder, much to the delight of sandwich lovers everywhere, invented a machine that could actually cut an entire loaf into equal pieces all at one time. It was the greatest thing since sliced...well, since the last great thing. From the very beginning, you see, bread has been an important part of human history. There is probably no food that is more universal than bread. Whether it is sourdough, sweetbread, flat bread, or even crackers, whether it is made of wheat, barley, corn, oats, or rye, bread is one of life’s most basic foods. People need it in order to survive.

And perhaps that is the first thing we need to remember as we begin our study. Life depends upon bread. Without it, we die. How many times have we watched the evening news and seen reports of the great famines, the political upheavals, and the terrible wars that sometime sweep across our planet? How many times have we seen the bloated bellies and sunken eyes of children, the innocent victims of those famines, politics, and wars, because they have no bread to eat? And how many times have we seen the wild and chaotic desperation of people when those relief trucks finally roll into refugee camps with bags their full of grain? It is quite obvious that life depends upon

bread. When people say that, “bread is the staff of life,” they are not kidding. You and I cannot live without having bread to eat.

That is a truth that is obvious even to the Bible. It is very evident that even the writers of the biblical drama understood the importance of bread. As you heard from the Book of Exodus, and as you heard Jesus allude in the lesson from John, when the children of Israel wandered the wilderness without anything to eat, God rained manna down upon them. To this day, no one is quite sure what manna was. Commentators say that it could be simply a phenomenon of the desert. Some say that it is either the sap of a certain tree or the secretions of certain insects, and that certainly could be true. But whatever it might have been or from wherever it may have come, when it was collected by the Israelites, it literally became their daily bread. And in time they came to understand that daily bread to be a wonderful gift of their providing God, as that which literally saved their lives. It was exactly what they needed to survive.

But as important as bread was for their survival and for ours, it is also important to note that bread only sustains life, it does not make life into what God intended it to be. Even when those relief agencies are able to get those sacks of grain to those refugee camps, and even when those who are so desperately hungry finally do get something to eat, they usually still find themselves in a most desperate situation: poor, dispossessed, at the mercy of hostile or inept governments and even the weather. Jesus said that men and women do not live by bread alone, and he was so right. Bread might be able to satisfy our physical needs, but not necessarily our spiritual needs. As a matter of fact, William Barclay once wrote that, “There are two kinds of hunger. There is a physical hunger which physical food can satisfy; but there is a spiritual hunger which [physical] food can never satisfy.”² Those are important words for us to remember as we finally return to the part of our story that needs our attention.

² William Barclay, The Gospel of John, The Daily Study Bible, Vol. 1, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 212

Remember now, Jesus had just fed the multitudes the day before. It was obviously a memorable event. As a matter of fact, other than the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, this is the only story that is told in all four gospels. Quite obviously, it made a deep impression on those early Christians. But for what reason? As our story for today indicates, Jesus knew that those who frantically sought him did so for the wrong reason. They had come to see another miracle. They had searched for him because he was able to give them something to fill their empty stomachs. But Jesus wanted to fill their empty lives. They were just like the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at that well. Remember her? Jesus had told her that if she drank the water that he offered she would never be thirsty again and she thought that would be a pretty good deal, as she would never have to drop that heavy bucket down the well and draw it up again. She too missed the point, you see. Yes, Jesus cares about our physical needs. Throughout his ministry he demonstrated that fact. Whether it was standing with the outcast or caring for the sick or feeding those who were hungry, Jesus touched the bodies of men and women in ways that no one had ever done before. But he was concerned about more than just their physical needs. He was concerned about their spiritual needs as well. And he knew that those needs would not be met by seeking temporary, perishable food. That is why he told that crowd, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.’”

Ours is a world that is hungry, you see. Men and women have a real appetite for something, but very few seem to know what it is. Is it Elvis? Jesus? Coca-Cola? I have a feeling that there are many in this room this morning that sense that they are hungry. I have a feeling that there are many here today that are willing to work very hard to satisfy that hunger—or at least for whatever hunger they think needs satisfying. So often, though, they work for the wrong things. As Jesus said, they try to sate that hunger with that which is perishable. Now don’t get this wrong. Jesus knew people had a need to work hard. Meeting those physical needs of both self and family is extremely necessary in this world. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be physically secure—as long as one realizes that those are the things that simply do not last. They are temporary, just as life in this world is temporary. That is why Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Those who

come to me will never be hungry again.” We cannot survive if only the physical needs of life are fed. In order for true life to happen, the spiritual needs must be fed as well.

I’ve always liked the story of the founder of Habitat for Humanity. Millard Fuller was a millionaire by the time he was 29. He had made it in this world and had everything going for him. All of his needs were met. But he knew he was not “full.” He knew something in his life was missing. While very successful on the outside, he was failing miserably on the inside. That is when he and his wife, whose marriage was “empty” as well, decided to change their focus. Rather than concentrate on the physical, they would concentrate on the spiritual. They literally gave everything they had away and redirected their search for those things that would satisfy their appetite of the spirit. It was out of that search that Habitat for Humanity was born. And while his life is still a work in progress, his story is one that illustrates what Jesus meant when he said, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.’”

And once again that brings us back to our story. The crowd came to Jesus looking for bread, yet they were challenged to believe. They came hoping for temporary relief from physical hunger, yet they were offered everlasting fulfillment for their spiritual hunger. They were hoping to fill their bellies, yet they discovered the one who could fill their lives. And it is the very same for you and for me.

Kenny was the Butternut Bread man. Every day he would come to the Baker’s Supermarket at which I worked and stock the shelves with fresh loaves of bread. Before he could do that, however, he had to take out the old bread, those various loaves that had not sold the day before. He would then take those loaves to the “Day Old” Store, where my mother would stock up on merchandise that she would feed her children. If the loaves didn’t sell there, then the local pig farmer would come, pick them up, and take them out to his herd. You probably know that bread, just like so many other types of food, has a shelf life. There is only a limited time in which it is fit to eat. It is perishable. But the Bread of Life is imperishable. It never spoils. And if and when you come to eat it, you will never be hungry again.