

“The Bread of Life”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 12, 2012

John 6: 35, 41-51

A couple of weeks ago, people were asking me where our family was going on vacation. When I responded, “Paoli, Indiana,” I had a number of people here say, “Really? You’re not going somewhere more interesting or exciting?”

The truth is it mattered not where we went for vacation. What mattered was who we were with on vacation. We spent the week with two families who were our best friends from our time in seminary. It had been a few years since we had been together as a group for several days at a time, and it was just what we, just what I, needed.

One thing we did on vacation was eat, something I imagine most of us enjoy doing when we’re away from home. We cooked favorite recipes for one another. We travelled over to Jasper one evening and had dinner at the Schnitzelbank Restaurant, a great German eatery. The food was definitely a highlight of the week.

But honestly, what was more nourishing for me was the time spent together as friends. The food may have met my physical hunger, but my spiritual and emotional hunger was nourished by conversation, by laughter, by time spent reminiscing and time spent looking ahead. Whenever our bellies set off their alarms, we answer those alarms with food and drink, meeting a short-term need. Whenever our hearts and souls set off their alarms, where do we turn to answer those alarms? My alarms are answered by time spent with people who renew and refresh my spirit through God’s Spirit: with family, friends, and relationships which meet long-term needs.

Over the next three Sundays, we will be reading from the sixth chapter of John. As we move through these three successive readings, I would invite you to listen to how Jesus describes himself each week, how that broadens and deepens our understanding of God’s love for us in Jesus, and how God meets our long-term needs through the gift of his son.

In today’s passage, Jesus gives us an image of himself which is easy to relate to. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (6:35). We can identify with the need for something to eat and something to drink so that we might live another day. And it is not the only time we hear Jesus using such an image to help us understand who he is in relation to God the Father. But as is usually the case with any of his sayings, there is much more to our understanding of the Word made flesh than a simple little slogan. As “the bread of life,” Jesus provides a food which is unlike anything we can feed upon here on earth. And it is through feeding on him that we are invited by God to feast on the grace and love which only can come from him.

One commentator writes: *It is important to clarify that as the bread of life Jesus is “the bread that came down from heaven” (vs. 38, 41, 50-51). Though*

described with an image from ordinary life, Jesus is unique. He even defies comparison with the miraculous manna that sustained the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Those who ate the manna “died” (v. 49). They were nourished only for a day. But as the bread from heaven, Jesus gives the life of the age to come, the life that has about it the tang of eternity, “so that one may eat of it and not die” (v. 50). Even the reality of physical death is not ignored, since eternal life includes the promise that there will be a resurrection at the last day (vs. 39, 44, 54). The bread from heaven, then, satisfies the human hunger both now and for the future.

The religious authorities, in line with their ancestors who “complained” at the exodus from Egypt (see Ex. 15:24; 16:2, 7-12; Num. 11:1), “complain” about the assertion that Jesus is the bread “from heaven” (John 6:41). How can a person whose name and address are well documented claim to be from God? The religious authorities know his mother and father, which precludes a heavenly origin. Instead of being open to the divine claim, they judge it by human wisdom. What they know (or think they know) keeps them from the only knowledge that really matters (Texts for Preaching, Year B, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©1993: 463).

Sometimes we have to get out of the way of reality to trust and believe that something better might be out there. The authorities saw Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary – “whose father and mother we know” – and could not see the possibility that he was someone greater. It takes a risk of faith to step out and believe that something greater is out there. But that step is not without help, or at least, an invitation.

William Willimon writes: *Whatever we need in order to comprehend Jesus must come as a gift, insight not of our own devising. It must “come down from heaven.” Lest all this talk of “heaven” suggest that we are here dealing with ethereal, otherworldly fuzziness, Jesus compares his significance to that of everyday, mundane, bread. He may be “from heaven” but he is also that which has “come down.” He is the Word, the eternal Word “made flesh.”*

Here, standing before us, in the flesh, is the fullness of God. If you have ever wondered just what God looks like, or how God acts, or how God talks, then wonder no more. In this faith, we do not have to climb up to the divine; God discloses, unveils, climbs down to us.

Let’s admit it. There’s something within us that likes our gods high and lifted up, distant, exclusively in heaven. We so want religion to be something spiritual, rather than something that is uncomfortably incarnational. Yet here we are with God-in-the-flesh before us saying, “I’m your bread; feed on me!”

Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to assuage our emptiness. Our culture is a vast supermarket of desire. Can it be that our bread, our wine, our fulfillment stands before us in the presence of this crucified, resurrected Jew? Can it be that many of our desires are, in the eternal scheme of things, pointless? Might it be true that he is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek? Is it true that God has come to us, miraculously with us, before us,

like manna that is miraculously dropped into our wilderness? (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*; Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2009: 337).

Where do we turn for sustenance when we are under the greatest strain and stress? Do we feed on the bread which is of this world, which only feeds us temporarily and haltingly? Do we look to the fast fixes, the things which on the surface give us satisfaction but after a while, leave us empty inside? Or do we seek to feed on the true bread from heaven, and realize that in flesh and blood God has come to sustain us through any challenge we might face? In our Christian walk, how are we witnesses that we have been fed by God?

The woman is struggling each and every day. The man she has known for so long, who has been her companion for over fifty years and the love of her life, has been fading in front of her eyes. Some days, time seems to go very fast. Other days, time seems to stand still. All of the time, all of her energy, and all of her life are now focused on caring for him, and it's taking its toll on her. Yet she takes the vow, "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health" very, very seriously. What will she feed upon in order to be nourished for the next steps of her journey?

Nine months ago, a mother and father move to another state, with the father accepting a new job with a large corporation. They relocate with their two-year-old son, and they begin the process of setting down roots. Then, just one month ago, the news comes without any warning: corporate downsizing costs the father his job. There is a four-month severance, but the race is on to make cold-calls, network with any and all contacts, and find a measure of security on an ever-shortening timeline. What will they feed upon in order to be nourished for the next steps in their journey?

He's a successful sports coach, and from the outside, life seems to be perfect. But the glare of the public persona hides his family's struggles, including a child who is tormented with substance abuse. In and out of jail, in and out of treatment centers, the child is now an adult, and seems to have turned things around. Then, without any warning, the young man is found one morning in bed, having taken his own life. The coach would trade all of his success in his profession to have his son back with him. What will he feed upon in order to be nourished for the next steps in his journey?

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35). Superficial spiritual food will not get you through the hard reality of life. Only the bread which has come down from heaven and is God Incarnate, standing right in front of you, yearning to lead you, guide you, and love you into the most complete child of God you can be. What will you turn to when the famines come in your life? Who will we seek when our community faces its greatest challenges? Will we continue to be hungry and thirsty, or will we gain a deeper strength from the nourishment the bread of life has already offered?

Thanks be to God for the everlasting nourishment God provides in the true bread of life. Amen.