

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
August 1, 2021 Pentecost 10/Proper 13/Year B
Texts – 2 Samuel 11: 26-12:13a; Psalm 51: 1-13; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

“Hey, mon. Life’s too short to eat bad bread.” Those words clinched a deal for me over twenty years ago. I was searching for a new assistant priest in Ann Arbor, and after several candidates had turned out to be duds, I was feeling discouraged. Then came Lorna, with her infectious love of kids, clear convictions and melodic Jamaican accent. Her interview with the committee that afternoon had gone great. We hosted her back at our house that night for a simple dinner. Joanna, who was about five at the time, was entranced with this exotic woman with the collar, telling stories around the table of her childhood growing up in Kingston, and her flight at age sixteen with her twin sister to Queens, NY, where she came to live with a relative.

I don’t remember the main course, but I do remember well that we had served some of the best bread on the planet, baked fresh in the ovens of Zingerman’s deli. Zingerman’s, by the way, is an Ann Arbor landmark where you can buy \$125 bottles of exquisite, mellow balsamic vinegar, and the most zesty, crumbly cheddar cheese this side of the Atlantic. (Well, apparently there are a few people who can buy that stuff.) We typically went for the sourdough bread for special occasions. It had an amazing crust, a soft, tender crumb, and left a little bite on the back of your tongue.

I passed the plate to Lorna. She broke off a piece, and slivers of crust flew onto the table cloth. She dipped it in the olive oil and took a bite. “This bread is amazing, mon,” she said. “Where did you get this?” We told her about Zingerman’s, and that we occasionally liked to treat ourselves to this heavenly delight. “Hey, Mon,” she said. “Life’s too short to eat bad bread.”

She didn’t know it at the time, but the decision was made then and there. She understood. And as it turned out, she understood that what is true for the bread that feeds our bodies is also true for the bread that feeds our souls. Life’s too short to eat bad bread.

John the evangelist goes to great lengths to convey that message. John is not the only one to tell this story of the feeding of the 5000. All the gospel writers tell it. The story of Jesus providing food for a huge crowd from meager supplies must have been wide-spread throughout the Mediterranean world, and it obviously impressed the evangelists. For Matthew, Mark and Luke, it provided one more great way to tell both of Jesus’ compassion and his power to work miracles. But those gospels don’t elaborate at all on the story. They just tell it plainly as one of a sequence of narratives about Jesus’ impressive power. They seem to focus mostly on the “wow” factor of his ability to create an abundance out of so little.

John, on the other hand, moves this story in some other directions. He tells it like the other three, with some subtle differences. But for John, the story of the feeding of the 5000 is not so much about the miracle of the multiplication of food. The story instead becomes the basis for a theological excursus on who Jesus is. We will be immersed in that excursus for several more Sundays. And this should not surprise us, for John’s main concern throughout his gospel is to tell us who Jesus is. Jesus points to himself over and over again in John’s gospel, not in order to inflate his own ego, but rather in order to show people who God is. John’s Jesus is the revealer of God, the one through whom we see and experience God. The eternal Word has become flesh, as he writes in the prologue to his gospel.

What we heard a few minutes ago from John’s gospel is part of that expansive reflection on the feeding of the 5000, part of John’s reflection on who Jesus is. And he does it brilliantly by picking up on the image of bread from the story. Don’t be so enamored by what you saw up on the mountain, Jesus tells the crowds. You saw thousands fed with a few morsels of bread and a few fish. It’s really no different from the experience of our ancestors in the wilderness. God fed them too with manna from heaven. You know God provides. But what you experienced up on the

mountain and what our ancestors experienced in the wilderness are merely signs of something infinitely greater. Your bellies are full, but your souls are still hungry. So know this: *I am* the bread of life. *I am* the living bread, which comes down from heaven. I am the divine food that nourishes your life with God. I am no mass produced, spongy wonder substance riddled with artificial colors and preservatives. I am the real deal. Life's too short to eat bad bread.

John makes this the first of seven of what have come to be called the "I Am" statements, statements by which Jesus identifies himself with God through an image that is familiar to us. Holy Trinity in Clemson, where I served for ten years, has a stunning rose window behind the altar that depicts these "I Am" statements through the petals of the rose. There actually are eight petals in that window; the eighth comes not from the Gospel of John, but from the Apocalypse of John. You will recognize those statements: I am the door; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the light of the world; I am the Alpha and the Omega – that's the one from the Apocalypse – I am the True Vine; I am the Resurrection; I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; I am the Bread of life.

That last one brings us back to today, and back to food, and back to good bread. I am the bread of life. In a society in which the food service industry has seen tremendous growth, the negative effects of the pandemic notwithstanding, even as thousands around the world continue to die of starvation and malnutrition every day; in a society in which there is an increasingly robust, corollary diet industry; in a society in which we have twenty four hour access to several television networks devoted exclusively to food, its preparation and its consumption – in that society, it is very easy to forget that our first food, our basic nourishment, is that which nourishes our relationship with God. It's easy to forget that life is too short to eat bad bread, that we need the real deal.

We come here to be fed with the bread of life. Think of Sunday as our weekly celebratory banquet. It is the time to reconnect with the wider family, remind ourselves of what is truly important, and share in the Eucharistic feast that is our primary food, the Body and Blood of Christ. But as we all know, no matter how much we eat at Sunday dinner, we're still hungry again on Monday morning. Just as we need to eat a healthy diet every day of the week, so too we need a healthy daily diet of Christ, the good bread. That diet might include of a wide variety that appeals to different spiritual palates. But just as every loaf of bread, no matter what the variety, includes basic elements of flour, some kind of leavening and liquid; so, too, there are some consistent, basic elements in the other kind of bread as well: prayer, reflection on scripture, self-examination, and discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives are among those basics. That's the good bread. That's how we stay nourished.

Christ is the bread of life, the living bread which has come down from heaven. We only need to give thanks, and sit down and eat. After all, life's too short to eat bad bread.