

Reflection

August 18, 2024

John 6:

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Title: Jesus is the bread of life

Prayer: Holy One, sometimes we get confused. We make simple things complex, or we simplify complex things too much. Open our ears and hearts and help us filter through the noise of the words to find your message for us today.  
Amen.

“Do you eat to live or do you live to eat?”

That’s what my Uncle Frank would ask me every time we cooked dinner together. And every time I’d say “oh, I think I live to eat, Uncle Frank. How about you?” And, he’d say “I eat to live.”

He wasn’t fussed about food. As long as he got enough in his body to keep breathing he was okay. It didn’t matter too much to him what it was or how it was presented. A few arrow root cookies would tide him over if that’s all that was in the cupboard.

Whereas I lived to eat, in that I liked to set the table, decide what all the raw ingredients were going to be and how they’d fit together into something that looked like a meal. There was more to eating for me than just eating.

This week, in part 1 of the “bread of life discourse” we’re going to focus on the notion of eating to live; and next week we’ll sink more into living to eat.

As Ruth mentioned, just prior to today’s text Jesus fed 5000 families, so bread and nourishment were on the minds of the people. But Jesus was quick to scold – he criticized them that they wanted to be around him, not because he performed this incredible sign but because he fed them and now they were full. The day-to-day task of eating was satisfied and it’d be great if he could do that again. He tells them “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

Reading chapter six multiple times you begin to notice the repetition of the word 'bread' and the phrase 'believe in me.' "Bread" occurs 24 times in the gospel of John – and 17 of those times are in chapter six. The word "believe" occurs 97 times in the whole gospel and 9 times just in chapter six.

So it appears the image of bread and the call to believe are prominent here.

What if this is the goal of this 'bread of life discourse?' To get us to believe in Jesus. To believe not just that Jesus is a great teacher, but that God had something to do with Jesus showing up when he did, and being able to do all the things that he did? Including being crucified and rising again?

That's heady stuff to just nonchalantly agree too.

As soon as we say out loud something like, "oh yes, I believe Jesus was sent from God, that he could turn three loaves into enough to feed 5000, that he turned water into wine, that he could rub dirt on someone's eyes and they'd be able to see, that he rose from the grave and appeared to the disciples, that death was not a match for him" ... as soon as we say things like that our critical minds kick in to rationalize, refute and dismiss the WONDER of it all.

We do ourselves a disservice with words, don't we? The message that is screaming from this passage is 'believe. Please. Just believe. Believe you are loved. Believe you matter. Believe you have value. Believe life is worth it. Believe God is with you. Believe you are beloved. Believe. Just Believe. Please.'

But for some reason we can't. And, we're not alone. The disciples struggled too. Just listen to them tripping all over each other in this passage ... "what do we need to do to perform the works of God?" ... "Well, what sign are you going to give us then, so we know?" ... We need to see something to believe it. ... "What are you doing to prove this to us? ... Old Moses had the manna – what have you got?"

And, Jesus says ... (picture a big heavy exasperated sigh) ... Jesus says "It wasn't Moses that brought the manna, that was God. God gives the true bread – the bread with nourishment – from heaven. It's the bread of God that gives life to the world."

So, the disciples say "oh, yeah, we want that bread, give us that bread."

And, Jesus says ... (picture him adding a big “oh for Pete sakes” AND sigh) “I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE.”

Like haven't you noticed the sick being healed, 5000 families who just got fed? Haven't you been listening? Hasn't your heart been moved by anything we've gone through together? Open your eyes, take a look. This is all you need, right here – me. Believe in me.

Three times he says “believe in me.”

- Believe in me ... God sent me.
- Believe in me ... you'll never be thirsty.
- Believe in me ... and have eternal life.

If only we could believe and follow, heed his words, we just might see that we'd have all we need – physical, material and spiritual nourishment.

But the disciples seem to be too focused on their humanness. They are eating to live.

And, a lot of the times that's us. We eat to live. We don't pay attention to what is going into our bodies – and I don't mean just food. I mean what we watch, hear and see; what we participate in, the opinions we choose to hold; the judgment towards others we carry; what we get defeated by. We aren't slowing down to understand and feel how it is nourishing us – or depleting us. We take what we can get and keep on moving.

Jesus is asking us to pay attention. Jesus is asking us to believe that he is the bread of life. Eternal life. Bread from heaven. That's him.

He wants us to cast our eyes beyond the very human part of being alive – getting food in the belly. He wants us to take him in – absorb his teachings, his way of being, his choices, his relationship with God – take all of that into us, not just the loaf that will fill our belly for the next 12 hours, but the bread from heaven, the bread of life.

In John chapter four we meet the Samaritan woman. Jesus talks to her at a well. They start talking about water so Jesus uses this to his advantage and starts talking about the

living water. How he is the living water. This changes the Samaritan woman's whole life.

Here, Jesus has just fed 5000 families with three loaves of bread. He uses this to his advantage and starts talking about bread from heaven. How he is the bread. How this can change our whole lives.

Jesus uses the tools at hand to meet us where we are ... a well full of water; a loaf of bread ... and then takes us beyond what we can comprehend ... I AM the living water, he says, I AM the bread of life.

Jesus wasn't doing all these things just to satisfy people's material needs; he was doing it all to reveal that God is love and that God wants to be in relationship ... with us. To believe in what Jesus was doing and saying is to believe in God's love for us and for the world.

And, when we can believe in God's love for us and the world then we can pull our gaze from our own self-centred, tiny-focused actions and decisions, and live into the world Jesus reveals to us – where God is so present that it begins to seem possible that everyone can be nourished fully – in body, mind and spirit.

John is a tough gospel to accept readily. Not only is the language cosmic, there is an 'us and them' feel to this gospel. It can be combative at times. And it can proclaim things we might disagree with.

For our liberal Christian hearts it can be hard to hear the certainty of 'believe in me because God sent me,' or 'on me God has set his seal.'

It sounds so exclusionary. And we are inclusive. So I guess it's best if we avoid these passages. There is enough to chew on elsewhere in the bible, we can leave this alone ... because it's just too hard.

All the more reason to dig in and figure it out.

Jesus' tone is forthright in this gospel. And, he's saying some unsettling things.

He was using Jewish scripture, stories, characters and motifs but he was speaking through the lens of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, so there was a twist in meaning and some people didn't like this. It was going against what the Temple authorities were

saying, was causing friction and starting to dismantle some longstanding power structures.

If the gospel writer's goal was to have people believe that Jesus was the Messiah and drop everything to follow him, then it would help to turn those who oppose the idea of Jesus as the Messiah into the enemy. Make them seem out of touch, condescending and concerned with power.

And the more this divide is nurtured the more we end up with an 'us and them' feeling, an absolute kind of language.

When we start to understand the context we start to see the nuance, the shades of gray of human nature, and then we can start to see how we fit into the complexity of that context.

Jesus says "the bread of life that comes down from heaven gives life to the world." Then he says "I AM the bread of life."

In other words, Jesus is saying 'I am what will nourish you. I am all you need because I am from God.' You don't need to find anything else – trust in me, believe in me, follow me, learn from me, watch me, do like me and you will never go hungry or thirsty – in the physical and the spiritual sense.

But alas, most of the time we only eat to live.

If only it were that easy to let go.

If only it were that easy to trust.

If only it were that easy to just believe.

Believe we are loved. Believe we matter. Believe we have value. Believe life is worth it. Believe God is with us. Believe we are beloved. Believe. Just Believe. Please.

Amen.