

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 13, 2026
Psalm 130:1-8; John 6:35, 41-51

"Bread of Life"

When I was a kid, growing up in Houston, we were a one-car family. I used to love to go with my mother to pick up my father from work. Quite honestly, it wasn't just because I was eager to see him. It was also because the route to my father's office took us past the Rainbo Bread bakery. I loved the magnificent aroma that wafted over the tree tops in that area.

There is something about the smell of bread baking that is very soothing to the senses. There is nothing as aromatic as baking bread. I remember that one of the first smells I encountered when we moved to the San Francisco Bay Area was the delightful scent of sourdough bread baking. The pungent smell of yeast which is slightly soured still makes my salivary glands work overtime, just thinking about it.

Bread comes in such an astounding variety of forms, shapes and sizes. There's white bread, wheat bread, sourdough, pita, rye, pumpernickel, multi-grain, potato, rice cakes, tortillas, cornbread, Fry bread, banana bread, garlic bread, and don't forget the ever-present zucchini bread, just to name a few. Every culture has its own unique brand of bread. Bread is a universally understood image.

That could be one reason that Jesus selected this particular image to use in his teaching in today's lesson. Jesus said to the people, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." If Jesus had said, "I am the steak of life," or "I am the broccoli of life," not everyone would have been able to relate to that imagery. But bread, being the universal symbol of a stable diet, is readily recognizable to all people.

Another reason Jesus used this imagery was that bread played a particularly significant role in the history of the Jewish community. While rushing to get out of Egypt, the Israelites baked bread before it had a chance to rise. Matzoth bread was and still is a reminder of the way that God freed the Jews from the bondage of slavery. While the Israelites wandered in the desert and were at the point of starvation, God sent miraculous bread from heaven, manna from heaven, to feed the people. Especially for the people Jesus addressed, bread was a rich image.

But they had never heard it used in this way before. Jesus referred to himself as the "bread of life," and "the living bread," because he wanted them to know that he is essential to their spiritual life. In referring to himself as "bread," Jesus declared himself to be the source of life. He called himself something common, ordinary, and accessible to all. It is the gift of eternal life which we receive from Christ; eternal life which doesn't have to begin "in the sweet bye-and-bye," but can begin right here and right now. Jesus offers that for which we spiritually hunger.

The hunger for an experience of the holy presence still leads people into all sorts of places. Crystals, pyramids, and channellers all claim to put people in contact with that presence. Average Americans flock to the top of mesas in New Mexico and squeeze themselves into Native American sweat lodges in order to locate the holy presence they desire.

But, as followers of Jesus we don't have to go to great lengths for spiritual renewal. We need only accept of the bread of life. Jesus, our bread of life is right here, right now. Jesus is not some fleeting, momentary, ecstatic experience we encounter once in a lifetime, if we jump through all the right hoops and meditate properly.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask, "Give us this day our daily bread," which means not only physical bread, but also, the bread of life, Jesus. Jesus' holy presence sustains us and nourishes us each day - providing a sense of wholeness and satisfaction. The other thing that Jesus declares in his "bread of life" analogy is that he provides an intimate presence for each of us. Jesus is our daily companion.

The word "companion," has an interesting history. The prefix "com," means "with." The middle syllable, "pan," means "bread." A companion is someone with whom we break bread. Jesus offers to be our constant companion, with whom we regularly break bread, sharing in both the ordinary and extraordinary.

In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus also says that he is "the bread of heaven that comes down from God. What does that mean? When I first entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, John was the gospel I began reading. I love John's gospel and get really annoyed with it at the same time because it is so full of symbolic language. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are on the road with Jesus. We can almost taste the dust in our mouths. We visit in people's homes. We sit and listen to sermons. We overhear conversations at a dinner table. Jesus talks like most people talk, telling stories about farmers, families in conflict, seeds, flowers, weather and trees.

But in John's gospel Jesus seems oddly detached, exalted, serene and almost above the fray of life. Even while he is with his disciples, he is somehow above them, talking in ways that sound strange and are difficult to understand, even for them. In today's lesson he tells

the people that he is the bread come down from heaven. What are we supposed to do with something that sounds so.... weird?

My Aunt Zoe used to tell me when I'd complain that I was hungry, "If you really are hungry, a glass of water and a dry crust of bread will satisfy you." She helped me differentiate between need and want. Nevertheless, she was right. When we are hungry, bread does satisfy.

But there is another kind of hunger that normal bread cannot satisfy. It is the hunger that comes from the withering of the soul, that wasting away which comes when we lose our zest for life and when our eyes seem dull to the world, and when we don't know if we can keep on keeping on.

Did you come to church hungry? Then you've come to the right place. Heavenly bread is just right for you. When we celebrate communion, we recognize that Jesus is our bread of life and the bread of heaven that we need so that we can stay strong and live boldly with Christ as our constant companion.

Jesus promises us that he is our bread come down from heaven, just like the Israelites had manna from heaven in the wilderness to sustain them on the exodus from Egypt. Jesus says that he is like that bread, come down from heaven to sustain us.

I remember a number of years ago leading a study on this passage when I asked the group, "What was the most memorable meal you ever ate?" One by one, they told of a fancy French restaurant in San Francisco, an elaborate seven course meal in New York, a lavish meal in Paris, and an expensive dinner in London.

But then one man said, "The best meal I ever had was in World War II, the morning after a night of terrible battle. I staggered up over a hill and saw a woman from the Red Cross in a little trailer in a muddy field. I stumbled through the muck to her trailer where she was handing out stale doughnuts and cold coffee. When she handed me mine, she smiled. After the night I had suffered, in that place, at that time, I'd have to say that was about the best meal I ever had."

Jesus says, "I am the bread, come down from heaven to nourish you forever. I am the bread of life." Whether it's doughnuts and coffee or bread and wine or grape juice, the effect is still the same when we commune with our risen Lord, who is the bread of life, our constant companion.

I believe in that bread. Do you? Come to him and be fed forever. Lord, give us this day our daily bread of life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE CHARGE: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has

something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen