

St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Sermon by Rev. Erik Broeren  
Sunday, August 4, 2024

Pugh. Here we are, at last. As a church we celebrate today new beginnings. The beginnings of new ministry, the beginnings of a new call and a new rector, the beginnings of our time together. I must admit, preaching your first Sunday with a new congregation comes with high expectations. Will the sermon be boring or full of difficult words? Will the sermon be long? Will the sermon be too long? Did we remember to charge the trapdoor under the pulpit?

When I learned that the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost was going to be my first Sunday with you, I immediately turned to the lectionary to see what I would be preaching on. Thankfully, today Jesus does not tell us that he has come to set daughter against mother, or father against son (Luke 14:26) or that we should sell everything we own and give it to the poor (Luke 18:22). Today, Jesus does not warn us about the coming judgment, when people are thrown into darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:12). No, today Jesus says: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

In the experience and wisdom of the church, Jesus teaching about the bread of life is so important that we will be paying attention to it for four Sundays in a row. Just a heads up in case you wonder later this month: where have I heard Jesus say this before. "I am the bread of life."

The more I think about it, this is a perfect reading for my first Sunday with you. For in the time ahead, in the hopefully many years we will have together, you will discover that food is my love language. You will discover I am always up for a nice Thai dinner; you will discover that I am very fond of chicken tenders; you will learn that both pineapple and anchovies are acceptable pizza toppings to me; and, you will learn that my favorite vegetable is carrot... cake.

As students of the Gospel, it is easy to see that food may be part of Jesus' love language too. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus' public ministry begins at a wedding feast in Cana. Going forward Jesus uses food to teach us what the Kingdom of God is like; that all are welcome at God's table and none are excluded or rejected. And at the end of his life, Jesus celebrates one last meal with his disciples, to model for us how we might continue in the Way of Jesus, strengthened and nourished by the Eucharistic meal we share together. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Jesus' teaching of the Bread of Life occurs after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. It is like an instruction for us to better understand what has happened here, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. You may remember from our reading last week that the feeding of

the five thousand occurred near the great feast of Passover (John 6:4). Those who were present, and those who heard about it, would have made an instant connection to the story of Exodus. We've had a little help from the Lectionary. Out in the desert, God's people despair and lament: if only we had stayed by the fleshpots of Egypt and ate our fill of bread. Now we are in the wilderness, and we will surely die of hunger. God responds to their complaint: "I am going to rain bread from heaven," God says, "and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day." (Ex. 16:3-4) Manna from heaven, tradition tells us, provided the people their daily bread on their journey through the desert, and a remnant was kept in a golden jar together with the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, until it was lost or destroyed.

When, generations later, the people eat once again on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, they are reminded naturally of their ancestors who were fed miraculously in the desert, and they flock to Jesus to be fed again and again. But rather than welcoming 5,000 new instant followers with open arms, Jesus seems to rebuke them. "You come to me only because you ate your fill of the loaves," Jesus says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." (John 6:26)

In the great hierarchy of needs, the need for food and sustenance is the most basic. Without this need being met sufficiently and consistently, life itself is imperiled. It is for this reason that we pray to God for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer. It is this need that is being met when the people are fed most miraculously on their journey through the desert. Do not come to me for this kind of bread, Jesus says. No, "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:33)

The bread of life is not the food that keeps our bodies going and stops our tummies from grumbling. It is not the food we share as we get to know each other and celebrate new friendships. It is not the food we share with our neighbors in need as we learn what it means to live by the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. It is the food that nourishes and sustains us on a much higher level. It is the bread of life that gives meaning and direction to our life, significance and importance. It is in and through the bread of life that we are connected to God and to each other.

As mentioned in the beginning of this sermon, we will have three more Sundays to explore with all this means, for these are not easy words that Jesus speaks casually. Our most basic needs and our highest needs are all wrapped up in God's love. It is a reality that has great implications on the way we understand ourselves and how we treat each other. For it is easy to love those who are like us, those who agree with us. But just like the Bread of Life nourishes all, we are to love all, welcome all. Including the people we may not necessarily like all that much – the person who just cut us off in traffic; the person who nags us to tears; the person who drives us crazy with indifference; and so on.

We are all works in progress. I am for sure. That's why I count myself lucky to be your new rector. Together we will work and pray for God's Kingdom. Not because we have it all figured out, but because we are all works in progress, with lovely qualities, great gifts, and many talents, and perhaps an edge or two we still would like to work on. So take comfort in Jesus' words today: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35) In all we do, and in all we are, and in all the times we come up short of our greatest hopes and dreams, we are reliant on God's love and grace. And that, my friends, is certainly good news to me. Amen.