ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Living Bread”* John 6:35, 41-51

**The life of Jesus, indeed, the whole of the Bible, is filled with stories and powerful images of bread. Bread** is a sign of Divine providence and presence**. It is the symbol for life and sustenance. Bread is life-sustaining; and so, while Jesus’ hometown may have been Nazareth, it is important to remember that he was born in the city of Bethlehem—which means *House of Bread*—which was the bread basket for that part of the land in those days*.* Jesus knew this and must have taken it to heart as we see in the passage we just heard, because this is how he offers himself to us. He offers his own body as bread and wine for the life of the world.**

***He* is bread, the staff of life. And so, let us begin there. Let us consider what bread is, and what Jesus is offering. Let us take a moment to consider bread.**

**The really amazing phenomenon about bread is that it is as important as it is common. In the diet and economy of most places and times throughout the world, bread, or its starch-based equivalent, is the universal part of the meal. Bread, in all its forms or manifestations—white, brown, wheat, barley, rye, etc.—bread is the staple. It is the bare minimum most people will have on their table, the bare minimum that people will gather around and still call it a meal. In every place and among peoples all over the world who gather for a meal, the most basic ingredient required is some form of bread.**

**And no wonder, bread—as we know from modern nutritional science—bread is energy. Bread, and all its other forms or shapes, is carbohydrate—mostly simple carbohydrates, but still a bare minimum for nutrition and well-being. Please make note: nutritional science does make a further, but important, distinction between simple and complex carbohydrates, and this is important, too, as I will mention a little later on.**

**Whatever the form, you and I will gather family and friends around bread, and/or such bread-equivalents as rice, or taro, or ulu. Our rice will be mostly white, but sometimes brown, sometimes long grain, sometimes, my favorite, sticky rice.**

**Or we will gather around plump loaves of crusty white bread, while in other lands, other peoples will gather around hard brown loaves, or flat, round circles of corn or flour-based tortilla, naan, pita, or the host of other flat breads devised and baked in ovens, or on stones, or in pans. Even couscous and pasta in their many forms, will function as the center and the foundation of a meal—both of which are made of some form of wheat or grain.**

**In the Hebrew Bible, during the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the Israelites are given manna in the wilderness to satisfy their longing for bread. Also preserved for us is the story of Elijah who is sustained by angles who cooked on hot coals cakes of wheat bread. Supplied with this and a jar of water, Elijah was given the physical energy, *and* *the emotional will to go on*, to save his own life, and to fulfill his mission for God.**

**All of these images and stories about bread portray for us a God who is also basic to human life and flourishing. Therefore, the passage that was read for us just now is crucial to our understanding of who Jesus is, what he says about himself, and how we are to receive him—*Jesus is our staff of life.* Jesus is the Christ who is the bread of heaven come down for the life of the world.**

**In the passage that was read for us this morning, Jesus emphasizes the importance of bread and its connection to life by referring to himself as “the bread that came down from heaven” [v. 35]. In so doing, he reveals himself as the most basic of needs for life.**

**This is how we are to receive him. This is the position he is to occupy in our lives.**

**Having said that, I would like us to recognize that Jesus’ language is deliberate, even calculated, and we should be reminded that in another part of his story—in another Gospel, in the Gospel of Matthew [v. 4:4], when he is hungry, alone, and tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy saying, “o**ne does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” [v, 8:3b]. In other words, the body *is* important, but it is not all there is to our life. However, the body and spirit *together* may draw us closer to God.

**Unfortunately, Jesus’ language was also quite symbolic, and symbolic language is not always immediately understandable to all people. Thus, whenever I come upon this passage, I find myself wondering why—when he sees how his words are being taken so literally, and how shocked his listeners are—why doesn’t Jesus just stop and tell them he is using metaphor?**

**We have all known people who are literal minded, haven’t we? We say something to them that is imaginative and wise, and they take it literally, and ruin the whole metaphor. Don’t you just want to tell these people to put their heads down on their desk until they have rested a bit?**

**I do…of course, sometimes I am the one being literal minded. We all are…**

**For whatever reason though, Jesus does not stop and help his listeners over this rough spot, and this is very unfortunate because it is passages like this that have been used so many times since then to portray these Jewish listeners—and all Jews—as wrong and wrong-headed and wrong-hearted, and therefore justifiable targets for hatred, violence, and even murder.**

**And so we need to come to this passage (and others like it) with a sense of compassion lest we weaponize Jesus’ words, instead of allowing them to draw us closer to him, and to each other.**

**The truth of the matter is that while there have been some who have only understood Jesus’ words literally, there are others of us who have “gotten” the metaphor, but who are still not able to receive the spiritual nutrition—that is the *spiritual strength*—he means to impart to us.**

**Going back to modern nutrition science: it is like the difference between simple and complex carbohydrates. The one fills us up but will not impart too much else, while the other truly contributes to good health and well-being.**

**Jesus Christ, the bread of the world, may strengthen the whole of the human community, but only if his followers accept his body as that which was, and *is* given for the whole of God’s beloved people, leaving no one out, but drawing us together as one body—*his* body.**

**We all hunger. We all need to be fed. We all need bread to live.**

**This is what Jesus offers—this is living bread; this common food that all people need—this is what Jesus is offering.**

**Jesus’ words are an offering of health and strength that can come into the world when all people are cared for; when none are left behind, but are instead received and welcomed as another part of the same body, or, in the words of the** Rev. Nelson R. Rabell González, a Lutheran pastor who serves an immigrant community and Stockton and Lodi, California, he says this:

*Regardless of how we respond to his claim of being from God and the Divine Bread sent from heaven for the sake of the world, in our common need for bread, we are united in our longing for hunger to end.*

*Christ is the bread that gives life to the world, not death. We know that Christ commands his followers to share bread, be supportive of others, and denounce the powers that be that create policies and practices that deny bread and sustenance to millions of people around the world. Just like when he commanded his disciples to feed the 5000, we are called to share the Good News of Christ both in word and in deed.*

Once again, bread is the metaphor—it is a way of talking about that which is needed by all people. Food is one of those things, but are many other things that we need to find a way to share with others.

Right at this moment in this time, we know that one of the most crucial things that is needed in countries that are not as wealthy as ours is the vaccine that most of us here in their Sanctuary have already received. In fact, you and I may even be offered booster shots before a person in a poor country, or a refugee receives their *first* shot.

In offering himself to us as bread, Jesus offers us life. More than that: he offers us the mission of making sure that all people have the opportunity to also receive life. He offers us the loving challenge of taking what we have been given and making sure it is shared with the world.

My prayer is that we will cherish and enjoy the bread we have been given; and that instead of being literal minded, we will look around and see what else is needed among people who are not as fortunate as we are—what other kinds of bread are needed, and how can we help others receive it—for this is what Living Bread is. It is sharing. It is for life—Christ *is* the life of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.