

John 6:24-35
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“The Bread of Life”

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Churches are usually talking about Food, or gathering around food, or thinking about who is hungry in our world and doing something tangible about that. For most churches who are worth their salt, food is somewhere in the conversation most of the time.

The first congregation I served had a cookbook which collected recipes from friends and members. They even accepted, and printed, recipes from people who didn't really cook, talk about being inclusive. There was a section called, “Men's Recipes.” These were easy to remember. One of them was called “Tube Steaks.” The recipe instructed the ‘chef’ to have a few of these on hand for when “the wife” was away and the children need to be fed. (*As you guessed, most families practiced traditional gender roles.*) Next the instructions stated, “cut open the package and put in pot with boiling water (*this was before microwaves*). Then, drain the water, put on ketchup, mustard or serve plain, with or without a roll.” Then the recipe concluded, “In emergency these can be eaten straight from the refrigerator without any ill effects.” There you have it, Tube steaks, AKA, Hot dogs.

Today in John's gospel we hear more about food, but Jesus seems to be saying something deeper, more eternal. Our story follows immediately after the miracle of Jesus feeding more than 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

We now hear Jesus proclaim, “I am the bread of life.” So, on this festival Sunday at Emanuel I thought it might be fun to attempt some humor about bread...

- 1) Do you know where an injured sandwich goes? A: The 'Mayo' Clinic.
- 2) What did one slice of bread say to the other slice of bread when he saw some butter and jam on the table? A: We are toast!
- 3) Two muffins were in an oven and one says, "Wow, it's hot in here!" and the other muffin says, "Oh my gosh, a talking muffin!" And finally...
- 4) What did the butter say to the bread? A: I'm on a roll! Though from your reaction I can see my stand-up comedy career is anything but ‘on a roll.’”

This crowd we keep hearing about has been following Jesus from shore to shore. They are trying to figure out who Jesus is? They are wondering if he is the “something” they have been desperately seeking in their life.

These are good hearted people like neighbors we watch out for, co-workers we chat with, friends we get together with – like us - the people in this crowd feel a responsibility to help others, care for the sick, and they share a sense of responsibility to live generously. But the crowd keeps following Jesus because simply doing all those things has not resulted in “the good life.” They don't feel lasting satisfaction. They still have a Soul hunger.

The crowd is looking for something beyond the momentary, beyond the norms of day to day life. In Jesus they see resources which are not divided, not diminished... they are instead multiplied, amplified, exceeding far beyond what the crowd even thinks is possible. The crowd is beginning to identify their own longing to contribute to something that endures. Jesus isn't just fish and bread on a hillside. Jesus is Soul Food, Spirit Food, nourishment beyond the moment, Jesus demonstrates how growing closer to God enlivens the daily routine and encourages us to step outside our comfort zone for the common good.

Many years ago I was surprised to read a statistic about driving. The statistic said the average driver of a car only sees 1 or 2 of every 5 signs along the side of the road. The same study found the average passenger, on the other hand, sees 3-4 of every 5 signs along the road.

And that is the issue in the story today. Signs. The crowd as they are still digesting the miraculous fish and bread ask Jesus, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you are the bread of life? What work are you performing?"

I think the issue for the crowd, and for us sometimes, may not be that we don't understand Jesus. It is more likely that our position in relation to Jesus becomes distorted. Most of the crowd, I think, see themselves in the driver's seat of their life. This can happen to any of us. We take on leadership positions within our workplace, church, or community. We desire to share the gifts God has given us, we pray we will offer the grace of God in some substantial way to a hurting and hungry world... and it is easy to begin to think we are in the driver's seat. We become tempted to think all the good things which happen are because of us, or we worry any failures happen due to our negligence. When we try to occupy the drivers seat we miss many signs.

Today is August Fest at Emanuel. There have been months of hard work put into planning, preparing, ordering food and beverages, buying tents and grills, setting up, getting volunteers and so much more for August Fest. Then along comes the roadwork, a decision to close the road, heat, and other obstacles out of our control... and these many hours of work are now compounded with many more hours of anxiety about whether people will attend.

I believe if we each allow ourselves to step out of the driver's seat God will reveal why, in spite of the roadwork, in spite of the obstacles, God will show us why we continued with August Fest? We all have goals for August fest but I invite us all to exhale... meet our Park's Edge neighbors, meet neighbors from Hales Corners and surrounding communities, talk with the Car Show folks, talk with the chefs and cooks, play games, and bounce, and share our new garden area with the community.

I ask each of us to let go of the steering wheel and allow God to show us why we sensed the Spirit's urging to go forward with August Fest this year. Let go of preconceived expectations and be ready for the Spirit of God to come in the form of a child, a friend, a neighbor, a visitor, a need, a new learning about an old friend, a laugh, or a celebration. Today, let's get out of God's way and just have fun playing in the Spirit with whomever God does bring to us today.

I pray we will claim this opportunity to share God's abundance with whomever is there. No apologies and no excuses. I deeply believe if we do this, August Fest WILL be God's success. Maybe not in the way we expect, but remember, none of us are aren't really the driver after all... we are good, hard working co-pilots who, as passengers are awake and alert for the signs of God's appearance. For we are those who are named by Christ's own name, baptized in the name of the Triune God, a beloved member of God's own family.

I close with a quote from my wife, Rev. Ann Utke, who reflects how I feel as we approach today, the obstacles and the opportunities...

"Call me a starry eyed optimist, or a believer, but I believe that generosity of spirit and trust in God's providence makes all the difference. God's providence can mean more than 'me getting enough of what I want, when I want it.'" In a mature outlook, God's providence means something richer and deeper and stronger than our individual wants being met. When we experience God's providence happening for ourselves and for others in our community... that is a divine encounter."

I am confident we can share a divine encounter today. I trust we will encounter the bread of life.

Amen