

In today's Gospel Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," not once but twice. "I am the bread of life." I love to bake bread and this reading got me thinking about bread in a different way than usual. When was the last time you and I ate the bread of life? I'm not asking about the Holy Eucharist because I don't think that is what Jesus is talking about here. I'm not denying that the eucharist can be, and is, the bread of life, but maybe it is just one slice in a larger loaf of bread. Is it possible that maybe you and I are called upon to become the bread of life, just like Jesus?

Think about all of the people, relationships, and experiences that have fed, nourished, and sustained your life. Think about a time when someone else fed and nourished your life and I mean more than that they fixed your dinner. I'm talking about the kind of people that spend their time and their presence with us. They love us. They teach us. They care for us. They encourage us. And our lives are fed and nourished by them. Sometimes it is not even what they say or do, but just being in his or her presence is itself bread. Aren't there some people that when we spend time with them we just feel well fed and full in some unique way?

Recall someone who offered you wisdom or guidance, who listened to your life, or spoke a word of hope or encouragement that nourished and sustained your life. We could say that they were bread for you. Or maybe there was someone who helped you discover meaning or purpose in your life. Perhaps it was someone who said, "I forgive you," and you were strengthened to move forward. Maybe someone believed in you when you weren't so sure about yourself. Our lives are nourished and fed by others in so many ways, and often we don't even realize that we have been fed.

How have you been fed by the life of another? What if that is what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of himself as the bread of life? Throughout the gospels we see him feeding and nourishing the lives of others in so many ways and situations: through his love, presence, guidance, and teaching; through his healing, forgiveness, and mercy; through his generosity, compassion, and wisdom. This is the bread that feeds the soul.

What if those qualities are not unique to Jesus. What if they are ours as well because you and I have been created in the image and likeness of God? This can be a way that we share our lives with others. When someone truly shares in our life, our life is nourished, our life is sustained, our life is strengthened. Who would that person be for you? What did he or she do or say that was bread to you, that fed your life?

And the related question today is this. When have you and I been bread in someone else's life? When have we fed and nourished them? When have we sustained them? When have we strengthened them?

We hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life," and we assume he is the only loaf in the basket, but what if that is not all that he is saying? What if he is not claiming to be the exclusive loaf of bread in the world, but showing us what the qualities are for you and me to become the bread of life for others in his name?

Have you ever noticed the incredible properties of a starter batch of sourdough? It is not really bread yet, but it holds the potential to become bread that feeds and nourishes. What if Jesus is the starter batch in us? What if rather than making an exclusive claim about himself, Jesus is giving us the recipe to become as he is, to become the bread of life for the world? Maybe that is one of the ways that God works in the world today as he did through Jesus. Maybe something in us gets leavened, rises, and becomes the bread of life in the name of Jesus.

Could you believe that about yourself? It is a pretty startling idea. That is the problem that the religious leaders and authorities have in today's gospel. They begin complaining because Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

The issue is not that they don't believe that God provides or that God feeds. The issue is that they know Jesus and his mom and dad. They know where he is from. He is the kid from Nazareth; he could not be "bread from heaven." That's often the problem for religious people like them. They know just enough that they think they don't need to know anything more or consider that there could be more to know. They have arrived at their set of beliefs about their relationships with God, and there really is not room for much more. Jesus couldn't be from heaven because he is from Nazareth, and they couldn't have the worldly and the heavenly together in the same person. Yet that is precisely who Jesus was and is, fully God and fully human.

So, luckily for us we don't have that exact problem. We believe that Jesus is from heaven. We have a different problem, however. We believe Jesus is the Son of God come down from heaven. But the idea that he could actually be calling you and me to serve God as he does seem a bit out of reach. There's a problem for religious people like us. We tend to think that it would take special gifts and knowledge to believe that Jesus could ever call you and me to serve as he did. Yet, ever since he departed the earth, that is precisely who we are as his physical body on earth, empowered and energized by his spirit. Maybe we are the bread of life leavened by the presence of Jesus in our lives. That is what it means to be the church as the Body of Christ.

I think that is the direction and focus of Jesus these last few Sundays. We have been in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel for the last three weeks. It's been three weeks of feeding, three weeks of bread, and we've got two more to go. Something is going on here. Jesus begins with the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish. But maybe that's only to get our attention and to tell us that it is really not about the bread or fish. It is about a way of living, it is about a way of relating. Remember last week? He said you have got to know the difference between food that perishes and food that endures for eternal life, between bread that is perishable and bread that is imperishable. And then he takes off on this bread of life stuff: the bread that lasts, the bread that endures, the bread that never runs out, the bread that never gets stale or moldy.

The reality is that there is a lot of bread in this world. For Jesus, however, the only bread that matters is the bread that endures, the bread of life. But if you look through the scriptures you will find references to all sorts of bread: the bread of adversity, the bread of tears, the bread of affliction, the bread of mourning, the bread of wickedness, the bread of idleness, the bread of the stingy, and it goes on and on. And when you get right down to it, there are

really only two kinds of bread; the bread of life that feeds and nourishes and sustains, and all the other bread that leaves us hungry and malnourished.

Again, I think the bottom line here is that we do tend to have some resistance to truly seeing ourselves as the Body of Christ, the real physical presence of Jesus on the earth. Yet he was very clear with his disciples after the Resurrection when he told them in John 20:21, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Through our baptism you and I have chosen to pick up that responsibility by becoming his disciples in the world today. This is why we can believe that Jesus does call you and me to be the bread of life in the world just as he was during his time on earth. We can do this because he supplies the power that enables us to accomplish the mission we have taken on.

Let's not forget the old saying, "You are what you eat." As we receive the bread of the eucharist in a little while let us remind ourselves that it is Jesus, the bread of life entering our bodies, our lives, the leaven that leads us to new life. Let us be reminded that we are called to be bread to others in his name. Amen