

The Bread of Life
John 6: 22-35
March 1, 2020 – First Congregational Church of Meredith NH
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I am going to have a little bit of a rant this morning. It might be fun to watch.

You need to understand that I am a really compliant person. I like to know what is expected of me, and I do my very best to live up to those expectations. I have been that way forever. When I was three or four years old, my father found me sitting on the porch step crying. He asked me what was wrong, and I said, "I'm afraid there is a rule I don't know about that I've been breaking." Today, as an adult, the easiest way to torture me is to give me conflicting sets of expectations. Last spring when I was ill for so long, I ended up seeing both my primary care provider and a specialist, and they gave me totally conflicting instructions. It made my head explode. Even at nearly 70 years old, I still want to know what the rules are, and I need them to be unambiguous.

I hope you remember earlier this year, when we began our study of the Gospel of John, I told you that it was entirely different from Luke, that we studied last spring. I said that we would come to some passages in John that would make you say, "Wait, what?" Well, this is one of those passages for me, because the message in today's scripture is right at the heart of the whole Gospel of John, and it is exactly opposite of all that we learned from Luke.

The Gospel of Luke is all about Jesus' care for those who are poor and sick and oppressed. In the opening sermon to his ministry, Jesus quotes the beautiful

passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In Luke we read Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, where he blesses those who are poor and hungry – not those who are poor in spirit, mind you, but those who are just plain poor – and he gives woes to those who are rich and well fed. Luke shows us over and over again that God is on the side of those who have little in this world, and Luke teaches us that to do God's work is to feed hungry people and speak out for those who are oppressed. Luke doesn't promise us that we will end poverty or hunger by our efforts, but for Luke it is clear that the whole purpose of wealth – that is, any money we have left over once our basic needs for shelter and food are met – the whole purpose of our wealth is to alleviate the suffering of those who have less. Luke is a gospel that is engaged with the world, because God is engaged with the world, and God has a pretty clear opinion of which side of things we ought to be on.

And now this spring we are reading the Gospel of John, which in many ways is my favorite gospel. Its picture of Jesus as the Word of God, who spoke creation into being, just takes my breath away. The glory of God shines through everything that Jesus does in this Gospel. Jesus does miracles, like changing water into wine, or feeding 5,000 people, or walking on water, even miracles like healing sick people, but these are not shown to us to demonstrate God's compassion, as in Luke. No, in this gospel they are shown to us as signs that Jesus is God Incarnate. We are supposed to read these signs and come to believe in Jesus as Emmanuel, God with Us. There is no call in John for us to be involved in setting right all that is

wrong with the world. There is just this call to believe. In John, doing God's work means simply believing in Jesus Christ. Wait, what?

So, in today's reading, all the thousands of people that Jesus fed just yesterday find him again today and ask for more food. Real food. They are still poor, still hungry, and Jesus says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." And "I am the Bread of Life."

Here is this gorgeous image of Jesus as the Bread of Life, the bread that will satisfy our deepest hunger forever. And I so want to live with Christ on that high plain, where all hunger is spiritual hunger. My heart yearns for that kind of relationship with God. At the same time, right in front of Jesus are these people who can't understand what he is saying, not because they lack faith but because they lack food, and hungry bellies come before almost everything else. We can't explore the higher reaches of our consciousness if we haven't met our bodies' basic needs.

So here we have two pictures of Jesus, one from Luke and one from John. Luke offers us a really challenging theology about wealth and power and privilege vs. hunger and poverty and oppression. Luke's gospel is challenging for us precisely because we have warm homes and enough to eat. Luke offers us a clear choice – either be on God's side in meeting the needs of those who have less than you do, or get out of the way, and woe be to you. John, on the other hand, gives us a picture of Jesus that only those who are privileged can relate to – those of us who have had enough to eat, and who still have a yearning that food doesn't satisfy. John's gospel points us to this Jesus who transcends all time and space, who is light in a world of darkness, who is bread for our souls, Jesus who is to be worshipped.

And my four-year-old self wants to shout, "Well, which is it? Am I supposed to be out there feeding hungry people as Luke says, or in here worshipping Jesus, as John calls me to do? What is it that God expects of me?"

What does God expect of all of us?

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Well, we need to remember that the gospels were all written down several decades after Jesus' death, based on the stories and memories and sayings that were handed down in the particular community to which they were written. Because there weren't phones back then, or TV or internet, stories were shared primarily within individual communities, and over time the stories in one early Christian community began to diverge from those in other Christian communities that were just a few miles away, all based on the same original events, but remembering and retelling the parts of that story that meant most to each community. So, when we read gospel accounts that differ markedly from one another, we have to use our broader understanding of the Bible and what we know from our own personal experience of God to decide how to interpret these differences.

I have to tell you, as much as I love the Gospel of John, and I really do, in this case I am rooted in the Gospel of Luke. The Jesus I know – the Jesus I believe in – would not have looked hungry people in the eye and said that their hunger didn't matter. He would have fed them. He would have asked us to help feed them, too.

We, who have enough to eat, come to this communion table with spiritual hunger, seeking the bread that satisfies hungry hearts. I am so grateful to be able to receive this communion bread as spiritual food, knowing we will have coffee hour in a moment, and then we will go home to a fridge and a pantry with still more there. We can receive this bread in the way the Gospel of John intends, as food for our souls.

So, when communion comes, receive this precious Bread of Life and let it nourish your soul. Let it feed your spirit. Let it connect you to the Christ who transcends all time and space, who is the very face of God in human form. Feel the blessing of the gift of himself in this bread. And then, by all means, go out into the world and feed those who are hungry. Give to each what they need. Provide a meal for the Salvation Army, or give a can of beans to the Food Pantry. Or donate to Church World Service and other agencies that respond to disasters. Or do something to solve one of the problems that trap people in poverty. Or bake a loaf of bread and take it to someone who is lonely, then sit a while and share stories with them. Or make soup for a relative who is ill, and plump her pillow before you leave. Reach out to someone who needs you. Feed their bodies. Feed their spirits.

The Bread of Life, this amazing gift of Christ's own self, nourishes our souls. May we share that blessing with everyone we meet.

Amen