

## Bread of Life

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### **Exodus 16:1-4, 9-15**

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for God has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

### **John 6:24-35**

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God has set God's seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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## **Bread of Life**

"I am the Bread of Life." It's such a simple statement: six words whose meaning we all know; and yet, when put together, they are baffling. What does Jesus mean he is the bread of life? How can a person be bread? And what is the bread of life anyway?

Although John's Gospel does not include the story of Jesus' last supper with his disciple when he breaks bread and gives it to them saying, "this is my body," these Bread of Life passages in John seem to be saying almost the same thing. Unfortunately, connecting these passages to Communion doesn't really help to clarify anything—why is the bread Jesus and why would we eat Jesus? If you've never once wondered about cannibalism with regard to Communion, I apologize, I suspect you will from now on. But that seems to be what the passage from this morning and the practice of Communion are suggesting, doesn't it?

I have to admit that when we studied the theology of Communion in seminary, I didn't find it particularly illuminating. It doesn't take much reading before a theological dictionary becomes necessary to make sense of words like "transubstantiation, anamnesis, elementarism, instrumentalism," and the like. There were moments in seminary when reading about a practice or a particular Bible passage would cause an 'aha!' moment—when the clouds parted and suddenly there were words to describe or explain what was previously only intuited or felt. Studying the meaning behind Communion was not one of those moments.

But it's hard to criticize. After all, what does Jesus mean when he breaks bread and gives it to his disciples, telling them to take and eat, that this is his body, broken for them? What does Jesus mean when he tells the mob stalking him that he is the bread of life? How *do* you explain what it is to partake in Communion, what that experience is like, what it means? It's not altogether surprising that theologians have had to reach for obscure words to try to make sense of what Jesus was saying and what we continue to do each time we gather together to celebrate Communion.

Yet, despite the fact that all of the theologies of Communion rely on obscure vocabulary, an agreement or consensus has never been reached. Indeed, the understanding of what Jesus meant when he claimed to be the bread of life (and what it means when we break that bread and consume it) is one of the things that continues to distinguish one Christian denomination from another.

For Catholics, the Communion liturgy actually changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus—this is why you don't chew a Catholic Communion wafer and why the elements (the wafers and the wine) must be consumed and can't be dropped, because God forbid you chew on Jesus, or leave Jesus' body and blood sitting around so it attracts flies, let alone that you would show Christ so little respect as to drop him to the floor and risk stepping on him. For Catholics, each time they celebrate Communion, Jesus is sacrificed (again) for their sins, for their salvation.

When Martin Luther came along, he challenged this belief, arguing that humans, even priests, don't have the power to change material things into God. And so for Luther the bread and wine weren't changed into Christ, but the presence of Christ was still somehow in, with, and under the bread and the wine.

John Calvin, whose theology the Presbyterian Church largely relies on, believed that when we celebrate Communion we aren't receiving the actual body and blood of Christ, but that instead we *participate* in Christ's body and blood. In other words, while Luther understood the presence of Christ to come down and inhabit the elements of Communion, Calvin believed that during the celebration of Communion the Holy Spirit lifts us up into communion with Christ.

For Huldrych Zwingli, another leader of the Reformation, even Calvin's understanding accorded humans too much power—who are we to claim that just because we practice a particular ritual the Holy Spirit will do as we bid? For Zwingli, therefore, the celebration of Communion is how we *remember* Jesus' sacrifice for us.

Four fundamentally different ways of understanding what Jesus meant when he said, "this is my body" or "I am the bread of life". But that is only the beginning of what Communion means theologically. Because Communion is also about God's ability to sustain and feed us, both spiritually and materially; it is about God's ability to take that which is human and ordinary and transform it into something that either signifies or is holy and divine. It is about the Holy Spirit's power to connect us through food and fellowship to both God and one another. It is about our equality before God, about how we each come to the table and are fed, regardless of who we are or what we believe. Communion means so many things to so many people—some of which we have tried to capture and contain in our theologies, our liturgies, our prayers and our devotions, and some of which reside only in our own hearts, our own memories, our own experiences.

And so my question for you this morning is, what does Communion mean to you? What is it that you think about or feel when you move toward the table receive Communion? Or after you have received Communion and are headed back to your seat? What is it that you miss when we

break bread together but separated by screens? What meaning remains, even in this virtual form?

In past centuries, you would have needed to profess a particularly Presbyterian understanding of Communion in order to be permitted to come to the table and receive the elements. But these days, we proclaim a more open table, believing that God welcomes each of us, that God desires to provide for and feed each of us, no matter what we believe or what table it is we find ourselves at. Which, if I'm honest, makes more sense to me. Because even though one theology or another might resonate with us, I suspect that more often it is our experiences of Communion that instill the practice with meaning, and that theology is relevant only insofar as it helps us to understand what it is we experience when we come to the table, when we break bread together either in-person or virtually. And so I want to share with you four of my memories that help me to know what Communion means in hopes that they might spark memories or meanings for you.

The most recent memory is from five or six years ago on a mission trip I was leading with a dozen or so high school youth and two adult leaders. On the evening we were going to celebrate Communion, we created the approximation of a table using large rubbermaid bins. We didn't have bread or juice, so we gathered what we could find: animal crackers and lemonade. We found a cup and a basket and together the 15 or so of us gathered around our makeshift table. As we were about to begin, one of the freshmen boys asked if he could say the Words of Institution. Somewhat surprised (and more than a little skeptical that this 14-year-old actually knew the correct words), I agreed and began by offering an invitation to the table and a prayer of thanksgiving, at which point this barely teenaged boy proceeded to proclaim (without hitch or hesitation) the Words of Institution, the ones we say every time we celebrate about how Jesus gathered with his disciples and took bread, blessed it, broke it, and shared it. And as he recited, I poured animal crackers into a basket and lemonade into a cup and we passed the elements, each offering them to the person on our right. We closed with a prayer that acknowledged, among other things, that even animal crackers dipped in lemonade, while not particularly tasty, could convey the gift of God in Christ for us. When we were done, we cleaned up and resumed our ongoing game of Assassin. It's a memory that stands out because it reminds me that sometimes Communion doesn't look like the ritual we practice on Sunday mornings. Sometimes Communion happens without the bread or the wine, sometimes it is the unexpected person in our midst who can say the words we need to hear, and sometimes Communion happens in and amid the rest of our life with barely a break for us to notice that it has occurred. It helps me remember to look for moments of Communion in the midst of my daily life.

The second memory I want to share is from a seminary chapel service at during my senior year. This memory is a little more hazy for me, but what I have never forgotten is how the preacher came to stand behind the Communion table at the end of the service to offer the benediction. The bread that day must have been particularly crumbly because the table was a

mess—crumbs and spills of grape juice all over the table and the floor around it. And while I don't recall the words she used, the message the preacher conveyed was that sometimes grace is messy, sometimes the life of faith looks like a hot mess, but that doesn't mean that God isn't present in it.

The third memory comes from the year Adam and I lived in Princeton, NJ. Often, on Sunday afternoons we would drive into Philadelphia to attend Broad Street Ministries, an alternative church community that had just recently been started in the heart of downtown. Focused almost entirely on mission and outreach to the Philadelphia Community, the ministry gathered for worship on Sunday afternoons in the gymnasium of another church and drew the most diverse group of people I've ever seen worship together. There were seminarians like ourselves, young families that lived in nearby neighborhoods, young professionals who lived and worked in the city, wealthy older adults who drove in from outlying suburbs, and homeless people who frequented the church's food pantry and other missions during the week. Communion was celebrated every week and there was almost always a homemade meal after the service for anyone who wanted to stay. The memory of those afternoons and evenings never fails to remind me that the body of Christ is more diverse than the people most of us encounter in our daily lives, that we all stand equal before God, and that to celebrate Communion without making sure everyone has a full meal to eat misses an essential part of the point.

Finally I want to share a memory of a small, experimental Episcopal church in Mill Valley, CA where Adam and I served one summer while their priest was on Sabbatical. This was a small community that gathered on Sunday afternoons in another church's fellowship space. There were usually 10-20 people present and we would all sit in a circle on folding chairs that we had to set up and take down before and after the service. This church also celebrated Communion every week, but their liturgy was different from any other that I've encountered and included dancing. To this day, the smell of eucalyptus trees reminds me of those services and the absurd joy of seeing wealthy, white, respectable adults link arms and attempt to dance in a coordinated fashion. It is a memory that makes me laugh, makes me glad there is no congregational dancing (as of yet) at Covenant, and reminds me that the celebration of Communion is indeed meant to be a celebration, and that perhaps, at times, we ought to allow ourselves to look and feel foolish. Because what could be more foolish than believing that a first century Jew is the Bread of Life?

Unexpected, the ordinary transformed, justice and equality, the messiness of faith and grace, and foolish joy. These, for me, form my theology of Communion—my understanding of what Jesus means when he says, "I am the Bread of Life," and what it is he offers to, and asks of, each of us when he allows his body to be broken and shared.

In the Time with Children this morning, I invited our children to draw or create an image of Jesus that illustrates not what he looked like but who he was. And while that invitation is for you as well, my *challenge* for you is to create your own theology of Communion that illustrates not what the church says it means but what you have experienced it to be.

Amen.