

Proper 13B – August 2, 2015
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35
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Food for the Fed Up: “I AM the Bread of Life”

What are you hungry for? It's the question Jesus, in essence, asks in our gospel today as he addresses those gathered together after having fed the multitude.ⁱ Food was what was in it for a number of them, and they seem to understand—or rather, misunderstand—him on this level alone. He tells them that the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was not the start of a divine feeding program per se. Rather, it was a sign pointing to a deeper hunger and a deeper source of nourishment, addressing what one theologian called “the God-shaped space in each one of us.” This gospel would have us consider what truly nourishes our lives at all levels. What would life be like if we could embrace the possibility that *Jesus* feeds us; in other words, that the God-shaped space in each of us is satisfied by the presence of Jesus, “the Bread of Life.” Jesus addresses the spiritual malnourishment of these people. He doesn't do it with just more bread and fish.

Jesus responds to the crowd who remind him of the story of manna from heaven provided to the ancient Israelites.ⁱⁱ But, as Jesus points out, Moses wasn't the one who provided the physical manna in the wilderness; it was God who provided this divine bread. The people insist, whatever this bread is that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world—you bet we want that! “Sir, give us this bread always,” is how they put it. Give us this bread always! It's in that context that Jesus then says, “I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

As their conversation with Jesus continues, the people continue to talk and understand on mostly one level—the literal level of food to eat, and how they can get this food—while Jesus is working also on deeper levels.ⁱⁱⁱ He certainly doesn't disregard that basic level of the human need for food. In a world like ours where more than one billion of our brothers and sisters are malnourished or starving—one-sixth of our planet—we cannot disregard that level either.

The longer the gospel conversation goes on, the more divided those listening to it become. Some will complain, who is this guy? “Isn't this Jesus, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” In John's Gospel, Jesus successively reveals himself in these “I AM” sayings: “I AM the bread of life [we hear today (6:35, 48); and soon thereafter]...I AM the light of the world [8:12, 9:5]...I AM the good shepherd [10:1]...I AM the resurrection and the life [11:25]...I AM the way, the truth, and the life [14:6]...I AM the true vine [15:1]—all these echoing the name God shares with Moses a thousand years earlier: “*I AM who I AM*,” translated “YHWH” in Hebrew. “I AM”: the very power behind the power of being...“I AM who I AM.” But it was hard for the people standing right there talking with Jesus, experiencing his presence and reality in the flesh, having eaten the bread he provided, to grasp what he was saying. I think it's no less hard for us to grasp this, as well.

In a few minutes, we'll pray together, "Give us this day our daily bread," and then we will also receive "the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven." Receiving ... believing, perhaps some times more than others. Our daily bread and the bread of heaven come together in Jesus the Bread of Life. As one of our Eucharistic prayers prays, "Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength, for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name."^{iv} The Eucharist is the repeated offering of the Bread of Life. It is the constant offering of appropriate spiritual nourishment. It is not a nourishment given that will have us no longer need to work for our food and home and education, but rather it puts all of these basic human endeavors in proper perspective by offering them to God—"All things come of you, O God, and of your own have we given you," we say, asking that these endeavors be guided by God's love rather than by our compulsive fears. It is God in Christ who is the bread of Life. It is God's love given and broken for all that is the bread of Life.^v

The antidote to spiritual malnourishment is the Eucharistic life, a life where, instead of running to the refrigerator to feed our spiritual malnourishment—or filling our lives with pursuits and distractions that do not satisfy our deepest hungers—instead we head to the right source following a "eucharistic" path.^{vi} Eucharist, from the Greek for "thanksgiving"—the Eucharistic life is one nourished by God in Christ as we "feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving." This takes place within the community of faith at the communion rail, but also throughout our lives. This Eucharistic, this thanksgiving way of life is an element of faith that keeps our attitudes about life fresher and clearer. In fact, giving thanks—gratitude—is the fountain of youth of the spiritual life. It keeps life from becoming shopworn, hobbled by anxiety or taken for granted. Whether it's the simple act of sharing in the Eucharistic meal, or of sharing any meal, and an open door, a listening ear—or whether it's the action that sees to it that each person has a piece of "our daily bread"—practicing the Eucharistic life is the path to true spiritual nourishment, transforming scarcity to abundance, self to others, hostility to hospitality, and fear to thanksgiving for all God's gifts.

That's what this is all about. This bread of life, this true bread from heaven, is meant to be shared. Just as the event of the feeding of the 5,000 pointed out that we never seem to have enough even for ourselves until we start sharing, so also this holds true with respect to everything else in life. "For the bread of God," Jesus said, "is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."^{vii} Life is what Christ is about, life now, life full, complete, joyous, loving. He is the Bread of Life—food for hungry, *and* food for the fed up.

A beloved poet of our time, Mary Oliver, echoes Jesus' words in one of her poems when she asks, "Tell me—what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"^{viii} What indeed do we plan to do with our "one wild and precious life?" This is the spiritual question that Christ puts before us no matter what our stage in life. And so we need to leave this church today and get busy about answering it—*not* so as to prepare for eternal life but so as not to miss this one! What we do for a living, how we spend our money, what we

believe, the passions and causes we embrace, and the relationships we seek, make all the more sense as we connect our lives to Jesus' "one wild and precious life." For Jesus "the Bread of Life" is the gift of love, and, thank God, the gift that keeps on giving. When we sift through all that he is recorded to have said, when we behold the acts of goodness and generosity that are done in his name, when we are grasped by the Spirit of the Risen Lord and join him in his ongoing mission of repairing this world, we again know that the life to which we are called is a life of love and compassion, caring and sharing. When all else is said and done, or left undone, what remains is this way of love. Nothing else matters as much. And so we too, can respond, "Sir, give us this bread always."^{ix}

ⁱ With food, and beyond food, Jesus takes his disciples and a crowd of 5000 or so through a public experience of rediscovering abundance in their midst. Today's gospel story happens soon after the feeding of the 5000 and shows Jesus leading his disciples and this large crowd through a further public contemplative moment, cutting through illusions of scarcity and revealing the reality of abundance. Jesus had attracted quite a public following in Galilee. Crowds began following him everywhere. In today's reading, Jesus attempts to retreat to a quiet hillside with his disciples near the Sea of Galilee; but instead, his retreat is cut short by the crowds who catch up with them. The entire series of events which follow are all occasioned by a contemplative element, especially if "contemplation," as Quaker writer Parker Palmer puts it, is defined as a way by which we *unmask illusion and reveal reality*. Defined this way, contemplation doesn't only happen in solitude or small group experiences of tranquility and quiet. It can also occur in public ways in public places – even in very large groups such as the multitudes Jesus encounters.

Jesus operates within the reality of abundance and unmask the illusion of scarcity. With an abundance mentality we say that there is enough for everyone, food, shelter, energy—love, justice, knowledge...everything—if we would but acknowledge and share generously and wisely. Of course, around the world, and very close by, hunger, for example, persists for a number of reasons; and none of that is illusory or unreal, to be sure. Yet God's creation is one of abundance; therefore there is plenty to give and to share. It seems so simple; but we make it so difficult.

We live in a world where the gap between scarcity and abundance grows wider every day. Whether at the level of nations or neighborhoods, this widening gap is polarizing people, making each camp more and more suspicious and antagonistic toward the other. The issue asks whether there is enough to go around – enough food, water, shelter, fuel or land, for example. An ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough, so hold on to what you have. In fact, don't just hold onto it; put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without; and then defend it at all costs. For example, where one-fifth of the world's population consumes nearly four-fifths of its food and associated resources to produce and deliver that food - this leads to the tragic conclusion that when we act on a mentality of scarcity through our prerogatives of privilege and our acquisitiveness and wastefulness, we help make scarcity a very real thing – and these are some of the roots of war.

As many have pointed out, an affirmation of abundance says the opposite: namely, appearances notwithstanding, there is enough food to go around, so long as we distribute not only emergency relief but also the basic means and knowhow of food self-sufficiency and fair trade, and so long as each nation takes only what it needs, thus not restricting aid or creating unfair trade—if we are willing to have but not hoard, there will even be more than enough left over. Two bold and well documented claims that have been made over and over again since the issuing of the United Nations' Brandt Commission Report in the 1970's affirm, first, that there is enough food and food production in the world to feed everyone on the planet, except for the poor ways in which it is distributed. And secondly, the equivalent of one-tenth of one percent of one year's worldwide military expenditures would be enough to procure and distribute enough farm machinery, tools, high-yielding seeds, fertilizers and technical assistance in such a way that every part of the world could be food self-sufficient—or be able to trade—so as to have food security! The peculiar and ironic thing is that the people and nations with abundance more or less rely on an ideology of scarcity, while the ones suffering from scarcity more or less rely on an ideology of abundance. How can that be?

This all means that we need to look at the abundance and scarcity we each carry within ourselves, along with the fullness and needs of our households, *and* then also account for the wealth and poverty of our societal and global community. A way to build bridges across each of these is to widen our horizons regarding God's abundance in our lives and world, as a countervailing balance to our anxiety about scarcity.

Who knows whether the actual miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes was more Jesus' overriding the conservation of matter, *or* the conservation of selfish people who were at first hoarding their hidden bread? Either way, Jesus' whole approach refuses to be taken in by the disciples' pragmatic protestations. Whether the scene is with one cup of cold water, or a widow's mite, or a new way of dealing with our enemies, or starting with just five loaves of bread – Jesus' answer again and again was simply, "Let's see." Jesus operated on a very different set of assumptions. He looked at the same situation that the disciples looked at, and where they saw not enough, he saw plenty: plenty of time, plenty of food and plenty of possibilities with the people and resources at hand. Not that Jesus knew just how it was all going to work out, exactly; but what he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that wherever there was plenty of God, there would be plenty of everything else. Jesus opted for a way of sharing through a more cooperative process. Rather than sending the crowd away to compete on their own, Jesus tells his disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat"—thus urging his disciples to discover that community and abundance go hand in hand. Turning them toward a response that called forth the effort of a whole community rather than just individuals' own purchasing power, Jesus reorients them from a mode of buying to a mode of sharing.

From this beginning then, Jesus takes his disciples and the crowd through the illusion of scarcity into the reality of abundance. Jesus gathers the large faceless crowd into smaller more intimate groupings where everyday miracles have a chance of happening, where they can meet, interact – where abundance will replace scarcity; and lo and behold, a miracle starts to happen, the miracle that there never seems to be enough even for ourselves *until* we start sharing. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, while Jesus distributed the rather meager rations from the five loaves and two fish, probably some in the crowd might have laughed at least quietly, while others would have been mystified, while still others were embarrassed for Jesus, that he should have promised so much with so little to deliver. But seeing Jesus believe and then act on his assumptions of abundance, a number of the people themselves began to realize that they could share what they *really* had, so that the result was that everyone was satisfied. For what they really had in that crowd of 5000 were a lot more than five loaves and two fish. And so, caught up in the contemplative moment they not only witness a miracle, but *participate* in it – not just by receiving the food but in *sharing the extra* food hidden in their pockets, thus discovering their own capacity for creating abundance – discovering that there never seems to be enough even for ourselves, *until* we start sharing.

"Without God we cannot. Without us, God will not," wrote St. Augustine some 1600 years ago (Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, *If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel* (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine's actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, "He who created you without you will not justify you without you." (in his 169th Sermon)). We have God's abundance in us. That's the realization Jesus wanted his disciples and the rest of us to come to – whether in the midst of a large and hungry crowd, or out on a storm-tossed sea, or anywhere else our journey with the living Christ takes us. So, however much or little we have, we are invited to bring it to God, and to share it with others, believing that it is enough to begin with, enough to start something, even a miracle.

See Parker Palmer, *The Active Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), pp.121-138; Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 30-32.; and Walter Brueggemann, in *The Other Side* (Nov./Dec. 2001)

Our gospel today is an excerpt of his teaching, culminating in his statement, "I am the bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven."

ⁱⁱ as a reminder of God's steadfast love, of God's ongoing grace.

ⁱⁱⁱ He addresses the crowd at the most basic level of their literalistic response and the fear and anxiety that underlie that.

^{iv} The Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p. 372

^v As Jesus concludes, "...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

^{vi} Consider a couple of well-known definitions of gluttony, "A glutton is one who raids the refrigerator for a cure for *spiritual* malnutrition" (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 31)); and the other, "Gluttony is an emotional escape, a sign that something is *eating us*." - quote attributed to Peter de Vries. Matthew's text of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount gives us a further insight by suggesting that we compare ourselves with the birds of the air. The birds of the air? Now, when I've read this passage before, I have generally wanted to argue, not only for myself but also for the whole worried world. "Yes, but..." That is what I wanted to say. "Yes, that is a lovely passage and I really do believe it on some level, but in this time of major economic upheaval, birds do not have bills to pay, nor do they have children that have to be fed, educated and nurtured for many, many years. Yes, God will provide, but meanwhile there are an ever growing number of our neighbors who seem to have fallen between the cracks of this passage. And on a wider scale, with wars without end and economic meltdown gripping the globe; with food riots in many poor nations; with more than 850 million people suffering from hunger every day in this world. What about all of that? This gospel text doesn't downplay that, but it does suggest we look at the birds of the air and ourselves for a moment.

You see, birds are animals bound up in millennia-old gene pools that are rich in instinct. Animals do most things by instinct. We humans, on the other hand, are instinctually impoverished—instead we are bound to meaning. We have to have reasons to motivate us to do things, reasons that move us to act—to get up in the morning, or to go to work, or to come to our houses of worship, or whatever pursuits. Because we are bound to meaning, rather than instinct, we invent meaning. And a lot of that meaning comes from our fears.

Fear and anxiety are very potent feelings that provide extra drive to act or refuse to act. Fears of *tangible* things like hunger, homelessness, sickness, pain and death motivate a lot of our behavior. And anxieties of loneliness, meaninglessness, and condemnation are deep fears of *intangible* things that motivate a lot of other behavior. These provide an extra compelling force behind our drives and occupations. I'm one of those who is not only occupied a lot, but is also pre-occupied, which basically means that I think and pray, and get anxious and worry, and spend a lot of time with situations before I'm even directly occupied with them.

A number of years ago, I worked in Waterbury, Connecticut as an organizer with forty-five religious institutions. It was an intense job and I worried about it while I was on the job and also when I was supposedly off the job. Working long hours, and often bringing home grant proposals and other work, I recall one evening my then four year-old daughter came up to me and asked, "Are you still my daddy?" Uggghh, that hit me right in the heart. We tend to wrap too much meaning around certain things and take too much responsibility for those things; and that prevents us from fully appreciating other more important people and realities.

I know firsthand that fears and anxieties can make many activities and pursuits to be far more important than they really are. Anxieties about what we're to eat, drink, and wear, and what we are to provide for our loved ones, often make those activities more ultimate pursuits in our lives than they need to be. And even when some of us have the things we think we want, our anxieties can still make our lives unbearable. Our very concern for a happy life makes us unhappy. As Frederick Buechner points out, a whole lot of us use up our whole lives trying to reach the point where we can enjoy the lives that we have almost totally used up. The 127th Psalm describes this way of living as "eating the bread of anxious toil."

Our readings dare us to thank God and partake in God with thanksgiving for our whole lives and not just the parts we like. God knows that we cannot get rid of all our fears and anxieties. God knows that we, unlike birds, are bound to meaning, *and* anxiety. But God is telling us, "Be not afraid." So, we're not being told to have no fears or anxieties; but we are being told that we don't have to *become* our fears—we don't have to *be* our fears—and we don't have to create or be part of a world in which those fears dominate. And the

breakthrough in recognizing this is when we discover ourselves as givers—again, there never seems to be enough even for ourselves, until we start sharing.

^{vii} What is it that the bread of God does? It gives life to the world.

^{viii} Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day” in The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 65.

^{ix} So in conclusion, our readings dare us to laugh at our worrisome selves whatever our circumstances. For half of us spend our lives worrying about what we do have, and the rest of us, about what we do not have, while the birds of the air do not worry at all, and our heavenly Father feeds them. Again Jesus is saying “Be not afraid.” He isn’t saying that we mustn’t have any fears, for we all have those for ourselves and others. But he is saying that we do not have to be or become our fears; and you do not have to create a world in which those fears dominate your life or the lives of others. O yes, our God is a God of justice, make no mistake, as we are called to be God’s hands and feet in this world.^{ix} But let us remember the words of Deuteronomy [8:3], “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Or as Jesus puts it in today’s gospel, “I AM the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”