

Proper 14 John 6:35, 41-51
Aug. 9, 2015 [outdoor service]
"A little knowledge"

We gather in the shadow of the 70th anniversary of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese died. This first use of atomic weapons in warfare ushered in a world in which fear of mass destruction warps our perspective and dictates international relationships. While we as a nation seek to limit the capacity of other countries to develop nuclear weapons, the US, (and Russia and Israel) – maintain a cache of such weapons. Each country seeks the superior power to kill others.

Against that cultural backdrop, the bread of life, bread from heaven, living bread seem almost like pop slogans, devoid of meaning in our (national) life. At best, seeking the bread of life is counter-cultural given our preoccupation with death, war, weapons stockpiles, the death penalty. Do we even know what that means, 'bread of life'?

The pacifist teachings of Jesus were, and still are, threatening to many people. The Church of the Multiplication, in Tabgha, Galilee, is built on the site claimed to be where Jesus fed the 5,000. The sanctuary floor is an elaborate 5th century mosaic depicting the miracle. On June 15 of this year, the church was covered with graffiti and torched. More than two thousand years after Jesus walked this earth, Jewish extremists find Jesus' teachings to be feared, something to be destroyed– even though the focus of the destruction is merely the depiction of a miracle. ISIS seeks to kill or expel all the Christians from Iraq and Syria, to eradicate teachings and beliefs by eradicating the people.

Two Sundays ago, we heard the Gospel story about Jesus feeding 5,000. In last Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus chastised the crowd who came looking for him because they just wanted more bread. They were not looking for him, for his presence. I am reminded of my young adult children when they came home from college for holidays – I would get a hug, of course, and then they would look in the cookie jar, and ask 'what's for dinner?'

Seek me, not bread, Jesus says. The bread of life is about our relationship. Self-giving, not selfish consumption.

When Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days, and he was famished,

The devil said to Jesus, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'One does not live by bread alone.' Luke 4:3-4.

The devil's tempting visions of earthly authority, kingdoms of the world – like our materialistic cravings, our hunger for world dominance and superior killing power – do not bring fulfillment.

They are like food that perishes and does not satisfy our hunger.

Seek me, the bread of life, Jesus says. *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

Many of those to whom Jesus speaks (then and now) suffer from the crippling syndrome of ‘a little knowledge.’ Let me explain.

“A little knowledge is a dangerous thing” is a familiar saying. [for the trivia masters among us, this is a quote from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1709), an essay written in poetry! The essay includes such popular aphorisms as, “to err is human, to forgive divine.”]

A little knowledge – one doesn’t know what one doesn’t know. And therefore, may make faulty decisions based, for example, on three data points, when the decision should be made on twenty data points. Remember in college how classes were labeled 100 (entry); 200 intermediate level and so forth? The 100 and 200 level classes were prerequisites for taking the 300 level advanced classes. In my junior year, I transferred from a women’s college on the east coast to Northwestern University, and I petitioned for transfer credits that would allow me to take an advanced seminar in international relations. The wise department head gave me the credits, but required me to work as the teaching assistant in the 200 level prerequisite class. I learned more in that 200 level class I had tried to avoid than any other I took in 4 years of college! I did not know what I did not know.

Whenever I am tempted to close my mind to new information or ideas *because of* the knowledge I already have, I remember that experience. I ask myself, is my mind still open?

A little knowledge tempts us to overestimate our skills, make us think we are more expert than we are. The little we know can lead us to wrong conclusions.

Here is the problem. When it comes to God, and even to the Church, we know only a little. Our faith, our understanding of God, are living, growing things. I suspect that many who choose a position of non-engagement with Church or religion, do so because they have ‘a little knowledge’ and close their minds to learning more.

No matter where you are in your understanding of God, there *is* more. You need to be open, to seek God. What does ‘the bread of life’ mean to you today?

In the Gospel reading, the people are grumbling. Some knew that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary – what was he talking about, saying he came from heaven? To them, Jesus was human, and they shut their minds at this talk of Jesus coming from God. They might be willing to identify Jesus as king – a strictly human authority figure – or even a prophet – a divine appointment like Elijah. But Jesus’ claim to be from heaven? No. They knew what they knew about Jesus. Son of Mary and Joseph.

The concrete thinking Jew knew that bread was necessary sustenance – for the non-elite, bread provided half or more of their daily calories. The source of that bread – who provided it – was unimportant.

They knew their Scripture – the manna that Moses offered to his people. Manna was food to fill their bellies. Jesus was not manna.

‘A little knowledge’ kept them from hearing Jesus’ teachings about living bread.

I am the living bread. “I am” – Yahweh – was the Hebrew name for God. God says to Moses, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). God has always existed, and will always exist. I am *the living bread*, bread from the very source of life.

Still, the question the people asked, ‘Who is Jesus?’ is not an idle question. Why should the people – or any of us– listen to *him*?

As itinerant preacher and healer, Jesus occupied an interesting position. In first century culture, honor was ascribed to persons based on family lineage, where they were from determined who they were and what honor standing they had in the eyes of the community. Jesus was a non-elite. Yet, here were all these people, drawn to Jesus. His popularity was neither explainable nor sustainable based on lineage (Mary and Joseph, after all!), and so the conclusion had to be that the drawing power was God. Jesus was, in some way, powerfully connected to God, he performed miraculous acts. Was Jesus the agent for what God was saying?

Listen to what Jesus says. Even though those who ate the manna were fed, they later died. The *bread of life* is different because it is *from God*, from the imperishable source. The source does matter! There is a difference between nourishment which maintains earthly life, and nourishment which is itself *life-giving*. The eternal source *gives* life. That is the bread of life, eternal life.

Jesus identifies the bread of life with – his flesh. His life drawn from the eternal source, the eternal source made flesh. This is the Gospel of John’s direct statement of the Incarnation. Here, in this fleshly body of Jesus, is the fullness of God.

I am. Seek me. Find relationship with God through me.

There are practical, continuing consequences of the Incarnation, of listening to Jesus. But some of you, like the crowds gathered around Jesus, may be saying, *stop there. Too much God talk.* Does that reaction stem from – a little knowledge? Concrete thinking? Jesus extends an invitation to listen and to learn, to be taught by Jesus about God.

Can *you* set aside what you know about bread, about the *humanity* of Jesus, and allow your hearts to connect with the source, the *bread of life*?

Today's Gospel lesson leaves no room for evasion on our part. Is Jesus really who he says he is? Is the bread we need the bread of wheat grown in the field? Or is the bread we need that which we so rarely seek, Jesus' presence?

Do we seek this living bread merely to avoid death, or to live more fully through relationship with God?

Is the living bread for *our* (Christian) nourishment alone? Using Paul's words to the Ephesians, as imitators of Christ, are we called to be the bread of life to others?

Today is another anniversary, of the shooting in Ferguson one year ago. The Rev. Dr. William Barber, civil rights leader and minister in North Carolina, took issue with the slogan, 'black lives matter.' Isn't it true, he said, that what we mean is, 'black deaths matter?' The 'black lives matter' slogan disguises a reality, that we seem to be incapable of doing the right thing until tragedy strikes. In other words, until death intervenes. We count the deaths, but we don't support the living.

As imitators of Christ, we must change, not just in the ways Paul enumerates to the Ephesians. *All* are created in God's image, all receive gifts of life from God. This bread of life, this living bread transcends the limitations of our self-interest. We are called to empower others to live fully into *their* gifts of life. Give them Seeds of Hope to plant so they may live.

Jesus doesn't take away our need for bread. He offers us a bread of life rather than a bread of death. Jesus gives us another basis for being community: to be life-giving to each other.

Amen.

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