

The Greatest Thing Before Sliced Bread
John 6:51-58

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For these past two Sundays we have been doing a sermon series on some readings from John. We might call it ‘breaking open John.’ Using lectionary, we often look at pieces of scripture, plucked out, separated from each other in theme and place. The passages for these two Sundays run together, back to back, which is rare. It provides for us an opportunity to go deep into John.

Last week we talked about the origins of the John, the catastrophic changes that the early church community was undergoing. We heard about how the collapse of the Temple, the fall of Jerusalem and the terrible suffering and dislocation in that part of the world sent shock waves through both Christian and Jewish communities. We also heard how these struggles challenged the people to dig deep, to think large, to come to knowledge of God in Christ in new ways.

The author of John thinks large. He sees within the story and person of Jesus Christ new yeasty truths. John sees Jesus, in fact, as the very Bread of Life.

Prior to Jesus’ discourse today, he has fed the multitudes; he has left them and travelled across the lake. He has spent time alone with his disciples and frightened them out of their wits by walking on water. John does not use the word “miracle.” These are “signs” of God’s life at work in the world. After these signs, the crowds look for Jesus across the lake where they think he might be. Hordes of people have been gathering in anticipation of his return. They have heard about the “bread” he multiplied. They want some. Who can blame them? They are hungry and there are children to be fed. So they look for him.

Jesus speaks to them. There are three levels of “bread-ness” according to this Jesus of John. In our passage last week, we heard Jesus speak about the first two levels of bread-ness. First, there is bread as bread; nourishment for the body, which needs to happen on a daily basis or death itself will occur. Secondly, there is “bread” as the very Word or communication from God. Jesus lays claim to that deeper level as well, saying that it is even more important than the bread that nourishes the body. In today’s passage, Jesus reveals himself an even deeper, third level of “bread” – that of his life

within Eucharist or “communion,” as we call it in the United Church.

If we are to come to see Jesus as the bread of our lives, we likely need to take some time out to think about the bread of today. Actual bread. Bread as bread –level one. For those of us fortunate enough to be able to afford to feed ourselves, bread is very often a side dish. An “add on.” When you have no access to food, “bread” can signify a very different thing. In the final year of World War II, my father told me that very often bread was the only thing they had for supper. If you did not eat the bread, you died. I learned about this one day, the hard way. I was about ten years old and I decided that our supper of meat and potatoes was boring. My mother then, very sensibly, told me to eat bread and butter. I retorted that was even more boring. My father was irate. I had shown disrespect for bread. I think that for my father, although he was only a corporal in the Canadian Air force at the time and therefore our family income was modest at best, he suddenly came to the realization that his children took for granted an abundance of food. Not only that, we had no gratitude for this abundance. For him, the focal point of this realization was my derision of bread.

Bread. (Lift up grocery bag) I have here several types of bread. *(Holding up regular store bought sliced white bread)* This is factory produced white bread. Most of us have this in our house. When I worked in the country, many women scoffingly called it “air bread.” Not much substance to it. Unlike, the households of Jesus’ day, we do not need to make daily bread ourselves anymore. It is as close as the corner store. We can freeze a month’s worth. In Jesus’ day, every day was bread making day.

(Holding up another package of “foccacia” type bread). These are fast becoming my new favourite types of bread. They are called, and I am reading now the name on the package: “Blue-Menu-PC-Thins – whole-grain-round-white-buns.” Seriously, that is the name of them. Marketers know that the more names we give something, the more likely we are to be impressed and buy it. This is multi-multi purpose bread – foccacia, hamburger buns, toast, crumpets butter, sandwiches. Again, I am reading from the package. Impressive bread, indeed. Superfluous, fancy-multi-named, bread. Surrounded by this, how are we to think of Jesus: essential, elemental, absolute, “bread of life?”

(Holding up whole grain, solid loaf, bang it against the table to make a loud noise.) This is whole grain bread. Very solid, very substantial. We are now getting closer to the bread Jesus’ audience would have been familiar with. *(Hold up the flat bread)* This is Naan bread. It is very basic. It is made by sticking

dough to the side of a brick or stone oven. Billions of people all over the world still make bread this way. It is very similar to how bread would have been made in Jesus day- bread made with barley. Barley was cheaper than wheat and it ripened earlier. This flattish, course barley bread would have been the only thing that the vast majority of people had to eat for one entire day.

For the Bible, the word “bread” has been interchangeable with “food.” In Deuteronomy (8:9). God promises to take the Hebrew people to a place of bread. God promises to take God’s people to a place where there is food - where basic survival, basic “life” can happen.

When Jesus says I am the bread of life – his hearers would have understood him to say “I am life – period” All things that you need for nourishment – I am it. It doesn’t really have the same effect for us. It would have been shocking for them. Certainly, it upsets the people who hear it in the passage, particularly the religious leaders. It should be shocking for us.

What would the modern day equivalent be? Maybe for our scientific oriented sensibilities an equivalent might be – “I am oxygen.” We know that every molecule of our bodies needs and craves oxygen. Perhaps the same sense of essentiality could be conveyed – “If you do not breathe me in you will suffocate. You breathe me in – I give your soul life itself.” Nah. Doesn’t quite work. Besides, you can’t break oxygen.

Bread was broken. In Jesus’ day, people would gather for the main meal. The loaf would be broken and the pieces passed out to all gathered there. Everyone. Hospitality was and is so important in Judaism especially the hospitality shown to the stranger. The stranger is invited to the meal; the bread is blessed, broken and then shared. Since ancient times, the spiritual discipline of opening your home to stranger, to widow, to orphan is considered the essential act of faithfulness to God.

Something happens when you break bread together. In my first year of seminary, an experienced Salvation Army Major was in my class. She told us that sometimes new officers felt the need to rebuke a “sinner” in a public manner. She very gently suggested to them, that they not do that until they have gone to supper at the person’s home. Every single time, they took her advice and sat at table in the “sinner’s” home, the public rebuke never happened. Something changes when you gather around the table. Something of God happens in the act of generosity with table and food. The level of intimacy changes between people who break bread together.

Jesus says that when you gather around his table an unheard of intimacy happens. He abides in us and we in him. He is the bread of life and when we eat him around the table together he is in us, we are in him and we are in each other. When I preside at communion I am very aware of the concept of the gathering of all the saints who have died, around the table with us; we who are modern day, deeply flawed saints. At communion, we acknowledge together, all of us, the coming of God's kingdom, God's realm here and now and to come. A Realm in which no one is a stranger and bread is abundant, broken and shared.

It is an abiding mystery, this bread of Christ that we share around the table. The breaking of it is an even greater mystery. In breaking the bread we also acknowledge the brokenness of the world. That we are broken and that God enters into us - with us in our suffering. In breaking the bread we also declare that the suffering of the vulnerable, the breaking of the bodies of the vulnerable stands in *opposition* to the one who enters fully into suffering. In other words, whatever we do to the least of the world, we do to Christ. In the breaking of the bread we acknowledge our participation and our sinfulness. We also acknowledge the grace and the forgiveness of God.

In breaking the bread around the table, the first and foremost question faithful followers of Christ ask themselves is "Who are the vulnerable who have not been invited to the hospitality of the table?" Many years ago I met a woman in Wolfville, NS, who was quite elderly at the time. She told me a remarkable story. She had a daughter who was mentally challenged. It was the early fifties and such children were to be hidden away. She loved her daughter and could no longer accept this. Finding no resources and no one in any system interested in helping her, she decided she would just have to go door to door asking people if they had children like hers. She began a group which gathered children and their very relieved and grateful parents together. This was the first of many movements within Wolfville to extend hospitality to and receive hospitality from people with intellectual challenges. Wolfville eventually became the site for a L'Arche community where intellectually challenged people live and work together. During my ministry internship there, I came to appreciate the many gifts these people bring to communities. In our own community of St. Johns, our most faithful, most helpful members have intellectual challenges. I have never experienced people who take communion more seriously and reverently. They totally get that Jesus is the bread of life.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister to JFK, has died this week.ⁱ The founder of the Special Olympics, some say that she did more to change the world for the better than any of her brothers did.

Her sister Rose, had no place at the Kennedy table, where politics and competition were talked about and lived out at break neck speed. Eventually, their father, Joe Kennedy arranged for Rose to have a lobotomy. Eunice named this as their family's first major trauma. Eunice decided to turn the tables, to change people's attitudes, to invite mentally challenged people to gather together and take pride in their accomplishments. Eunice named her Christian faith as the source of this drive – to create space around the country's tables. In many ways, Special Olympics has contributed to the deinstitutionalization movement. The concept that intellectually challenged people have the right to live in their own small group homes, to gather around society's tables, to break bread together around the communion table.

As Christ followers, these are the questions in front of us. How is Jesus bread to us? Who is excluded from the meal? Who is invited around the table? Like John's ancient community, our society is undergoing rapid change. Our churches are changing. We wonder where God is in all of it. We do not know where we will end up. The gospel of John promises us that if we take our need to eat Christ; if we take the need for the breaking and sharing of bread seriously; if we gather around the table in radically inclusive ways, we do not need to worry about the ten steps in front of us and what they will be. We just need to trust in the bread of life. Trust, bless, break, share and eat. Christ will abide in us and we in him. It is enough for the day; it is enough for eternity.

ⁱ Mark Pratt, Boston, JFK's sister dead at 88; Special Olympics founder, Eunice Kennedy. *The Chronicle Herald*, Metropolitan, 08-12-2009.