

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 19 (B)
August 8, 2021
Text: John 6:35, 41-51

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Ever since the start of the pandemic, I've been baking sourdough bread fairly regularly. I had never baked sourdough before in my life, but I got some sourdough starter from Lisa Belt's Lovejoy Bakery and a huge sack of flour from Costco, then tinkered with a few different recipes, and I have learned how to bake some pretty beautiful loaves of bread—and not just beautiful, but also delicious. I love the crispy, substantial exterior, and the soft, fragrant interior. One of my favorite breakfasts is a nice, thick slice of sourdough, toasted and slathered with homemade pear butter. Mmm.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus uses the image of bread to help us recognize who he is for us and what a relationship with him means. Jesus picks this image of bread in part because in his culture bread was the fundamental source of nutrition for most people. Bread was food. But Jesus also uses the image of bread in order to tap into the people's memories of the stories about their ancestors—in particular those ancestors who were slaves in Egypt, and who were led to freedom by Moses. Their journey to the Promised Land was long and difficult. But God showed God's love and faithfulness to them by feeding them manna. They called it "bread from heaven." God preserved their lives. God gave them hope and strength to endure. Jesus wants his listeners to recognize that he is the One through whom God is preserving and sustaining life now. Jesus is the One through whom God is giving hope and strength to endure now. So Jesus pictures himself as the One God gives to us—the bread come down from heaven to give life to the world.

And here's the thing about bread. We can receive it as a gift, but it doesn't do us much good to just hold it in our hands. We have to chew on it and digest it. And in a similar way, Jesus wants us not just to receive him, but to chew on him, on his teaching and way of caring for neighbors. Jesus was us to digest everything he said and did so that, for us, he isn't just someone who lived a long time ago. He's not a religious talisman or identity marker. Instead, when we chew on his way of compassion and forgiveness, we make that way of living part of our lives. When we digest Jesus' way of humility and generosity, those values begin to reshape our view of everything. It's not exactly like the bread we eat, and that for me has become part of this stubborn bit of fat around my middle. But when we chew on Jesus as the Bread of Life, he changes how we see our neighbors, how we make decisions. He changes what we hope for, what we value. Jesus sticks with us in a way that gives life and blessing to us and to everyone who is part of our life.

That's what Jesus means when he contrasts the bread—the physical bread that the ancestors ate in the wilderness—with himself as spiritual bread. The ancestors ate the physical bread that God gave, and it was good for sustaining physical life, subject to all the limits of physical life. So in the end they died, of course—because that's what happens with physical life. But the spiritual food that Jesus gives sustains a different kind of life, a life that is all about not being

constrained by the limits of physical life. The life that Jesus nurtures in us is not limited by “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours,” and it’s not constrained by fear, and it’s not made small by resentment or bitterness or entitlement. Instead, the life that Jesus grows in us is expansive with generosity and hope and forgiveness. That’s what Jesus means by calling it eternal life. It’s the way of living that belongs to those who live with God. And we don’t have to wait for the life to come to know what that is like. Instead, Jesus invites us to experience that life right now, life that is full and whole, defined by peace and hope and joy.

Growing into this life is the work of a lifetime, because digesting Jesus and his way of love not only takes a lifetime, but also changes and develops for us as the challenges and griefs we experience in life change and develop. It’s a process, so that we will hear Jesus’ voice and absorb his wisdom in one way when we are young, when our lives are invested in school and friendships and moving toward independence. Then, as we grow into the time in life when we focus on marriage or career or children, we will begin to hear new things from Jesus. His wisdom will open our eyes to see things we had never considered before. And as we grow into the later years of life, we may find that Jesus calls us and comforts us as we face new freedoms, new challenges, new losses. And all along the way, our lives grow to look more and more like Christ’s. This eternal life is never an accomplishment that we complete or a product we possess. Instead, it is a relationship that moves as we move and changes as we change, and as the circumstances of our lives move and change.

And I wonder about sharing with you this morning a glimpse of how I’ve been experiencing the complicated work of chewing on the Bread of Life. The past year has been tremendously challenging for me. It’s not just the pandemic, but my mom’s death, and worrying with Melinda about her parents, and challenges our children have faced. I’m also deeply concerned about what is happening to us as a society, the divisions, the lies and violence, as well as what climate change is doing to our planet. All of that played a role in coming to the awareness back in May that I wasn’t just tired, but dangerously depleted. I needed to step away from pastoral ministry for a time before I really had nothing left to give. The last couple of months have been a kind of Sabbath—a time for rest and renewal, re-centering and healing. And a few weeks ago I had a dream that I thought I’d share with you. It might give you a glimpse of what the Bread of Life is doing in my life, and I hope it provokes you to wonder about how Christ is feeding you.

At the beginning of the dream, I was feeling exhausted and depleted, and was convinced that I didn’t have it in me to keep going as a pastor. Somehow, I received a message—I felt a strong inner sense that the message was from God—that I should go downtown to a certain bar and jump off the roof. It was strange, because I wasn’t despondent and didn’t have any inclination to hurt myself, but I was curious about the bar. And when I got there, there was a room on the upper floor that was like a restaurant, but in addition to the tables, there was some sort of apparatus where a person could buckle into a harness, like for parachuting or a zip line. All you had to do was buckle in and go flying. There were also people there to talk with about what was holding you back. And it was in talking with them that I was able to say that if human beings are just going to burn down the planet, then what does it matter that God is saving the human family? That community of people helped my name my fear, and see that participating in God’s

work isn't about the results we can see. It's about making lives and relationships whole, even during very challenging times. I felt ready, then, to take a leap of faith—with the harness and rope apparatus—and jumping off the building was like flying. And when I landed safely, I felt joy and peace and gratitude. When I woke up, that dream left me with a kind of clarity. The previous weeks of Sabbath rest had done their job. They had not only given me insight into what had left me feeling stuck before. They had also helped me moved out of that stuck place, to be ready to re-engage.

So, I'm back, and glad about that. And I wonder how it is for you. What is the process of life with Christ like for you during this season of your life? How Christ is feeding you? How is the Bread of life nurturing strength and hope and joy in you? And I wonder what leap of faith Christ is preparing you to make. Amen.