

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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John 6:35, 41-51

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

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

From the Oxford Companion of the Bible, under the heading, "Bread" we read... "Because the Bible portrays ordinary people in the round of daily life, bread is a common word in its pages from the beginning of Genesis (3:19). Every day was baking day in the homes of Palestine. Barley or wheat flour was mixed with water and salt, then baked in simple ovens. The loaves produced were such a staple of the diet that bread and food are sometimes interchangeable terms...when God promised (the people) 'a land where you may eat bread without scarcity' (Deut. 8:9), it was the promise of life itself."¹

¹ The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Metzger and Coogan, 1993, page 95.

“According to the Gospels, Jesus acknowledged the importance of bread...(and identified) himself as the true bread from heaven that gives life to the world...At the Last Supper, (Jesus) interpreted the breaking of the unleavened bread of Passover as symbolizing the offering of himself...”²

So, bread equals life. Bread equals health, and joy, and strength, and security. On a purely physical level, bread represents the sustenance we need, to stay alive. And there is, as Jesus taught, a spiritual, and sacramental meaning to bread as well.

Now, for much of human history, we teetered on the edge of starvation. We were one drought away from death, one crop failure, one hard winter. And even now, in many places in the world, bread, basic sustenance, is far from guaranteed.

Meanwhile in North America, we fight an obesity epidemic while at the same time, “(Over 12) percent of American households (are) food insecure... meaning they (lack) access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members” ...this is according to the United States Department of Agriculture.³ Of course, this is particularly devastating where children are concerned.

And in our country, it is not that we don’t produce enough food for everyone, it is that poverty intervenes...people don’t have enough money, in this country of plenty, to buy what they need, and so they go hungry.

And it is also true, that hunger exists on many levels. It is not just about physical hunger, though I don’t want to downplay that or minimize it. But I’ll never forget a friend I had at Virginia Seminary back in the 1970s... his name was Aaron Kapenda and he was part of a cultural exchange. He was from Malawi, and lived a very simple life. I remember once driving Aaron to a meeting in my car, and he said to me, we are driving across the sprawl that is Northern Virginia, “Look at all this. All these cars. All these people. All

² ibid, page 95

³ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=84972> See also: <https://whyhunger.org/just-the-facts/>

these stores and houses. And yet, I do not meet happy people. Back home, we have one set of clothes, a simple hut, food each day, but we are happy.” There are different kinds of hunger.

You are all familiar with Maslow’s hierarchy of human need.⁴ I think we could also call this a hierarchy of human hungers. Regardless, this is pictured as a pyramid, with the most fundamental needs at the bottom. Physiological needs are the foundation...the need for food, water, air, shelter and so on. Then we move on up to safety needs, to the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem, to the top...self-actualization and self-transcendence...the giving of the self in “altruism and spirituality”⁵.

And when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” I think he is talking about feeding all kinds of hunger...he is talking about providing an abundant life, on all levels, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual.

And at the very same time, as the church, as the Body of Christ, we have a call to be coworkers with Christ...in Christ’s name to assure the physically hungry are fed, and also to engage all the other hungers people have, at every level.

I read recently, a review of the book entitled “Kids These Days”. It is a book about millennials. There are no hard and fast definitions of when this generation starts and ends, but folks typically use the early 1980s as starting birth years and the mid-1990s to early 2000s as ending birth years⁶.

The author of the book is Malcolm Harris and the reviewer, Jonathan Thornton, is a millennial and also a Baptist pastor in North Carolina. I haven’t read the book yet, but Thornton, the reviewer, writes: “The main question Harris is interested in is this: What happens when people at increasingly younger and younger ages are trained to consider every aspect of their lives as investments meant to bring a monetary return?”

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennials>

The term for this is ‘human capital,’ and Harris walks the reader through the life of a millennial with it in view: ... experiences of childhood and schooling, college, work, government, and social life. At each step along the way the speed, pressure, and workload of millennials has increased, while the reward for such efforts has dwindled....—all aspects of their lives are thought of in terms of competition with other (s)... In addition... the rewards, frequency, and reliability of work have given way to inequality, (so called) ‘flexibility,’ and (precarious insecurity).

The result of these changes is an increase in depression and anxiety among millennials... Thorton writes, ...It turns out that being raised to view life as a desperate competition for ever-decreasing rewards has taken its toll on our mental health.”⁷

One of the goals of our strategic plan is to be a welcoming place for millennials, for those in their 20s and 30s. To do this, we do well to understand the challenges in front of them.

To offer bread, in Jesus’ name, in the face of these needs, is a call for the church can be a place that embodies a different way...a way not based on competition, and inequality.

A place where people can just be...where people are not a means to an end or the adversary.

A place where we listen to one another without judgment. Where we look at people, all people, but especially those in their 20s and 30s, not as investments in a future of someone else’s devising, not as a means to an end, not as insurance of survival, but simply as people to whom we owe care. In

⁷⁷ <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/under-pressure>

other words, we can relate to each other simply as children God, loved and beloved.⁸

This is bread, this gift we give to each other in God's grace. And we have a call, a mission, to transform this world, to participate in God's recreation. And it grows from this bread, this communion, this gift we give each other, and that God gives us. It comes from simply having space to breathe and to be.

Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls. Come to me, Jesus says, the bread of life.

It is such a blessing that we are all here this morning, all ages. Let us reach out in love, with no judgment, but acceptance and welcome and joy. Amen.

⁸ This line of thought was suggested by and paraphrased from the article: "If the church has anything to offer them, it is to be a people that embodies a different logic than that of work and competition. We have to offer them a place to be bored with each other. We have to take them and their lives seriously enough to treat them not merely as investments but as people to whom we owe care."