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February 3, 2008

"THE BREAD OF LIFE"
John 6:35-40; 47-55

As we've been exploring John's Gospel for the past four weeks, we've discovered that whereas the other gospels record numerous of Jesus' miracles, John records only 7, which he calls "signs." Some weeks back we examined the first of those signs, when at a wedding Jesus turned water into wine. We've also discovered that John includes long speeches or discourses of Jesus. Two weeks ago we explored Jesus' first discourse with Nicodemus and last week his "living water" discourse with the Samaritan woman at the well. In today's text for the first time John combines a sign with a discourse - the miraculous feeding of the 5000 with the bread of life discourse. This is also the first of Jesus' "I Am" sayings where he uses the divine name, claiming to be one with Yahweh, the great "I Am."

The sign or miracle we're going to examine today is Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. Jesus prayed over 5 barley loaves and 2 fish and after the 5000 ate their fill, they collected 12

baskets of leftovers! It's one of the rare miracles included in all four gospels. John alone reports the crowd's reaction, that after the miracle, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (6:15). The day after Jesus' miraculously fed the 5000, the crowd pursued him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Today's text is a portion of Jesus' "bread of life" discourse, which follows. He has previously said that God provided manna for Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness and talked about himself as "the true bread from heaven." Read John 6:35-40; 47-55, found on p.98 in the NT of the pew Bibles.

In the first part of our text, building on his feeding of the 5000 Jesus proclaims, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The people want Jesus to be, like Moses, the giver of bread, the one who supplies the bread. Instead, Jesus claims to be the bread. Jesus is not God's intermediary like Moses –

dispensing the true bread. He himself is the true Bread who descended from heaven.

For Jews, bread was a food staple, like rice in China, or the tortilla in Mexico. Isn't it interesting that Jesus claimed to be "the bread" rather than the potato chip or soda pop or French fry or cheese cake or ice cream sundae of life? None of those is as basic as bread. Jesus doesn't like himself to junk food, but to a staple. As "the bread of life" Jesus is claiming to be a necessary ingredient in our spiritual sustenance, not the "cake of life" for those who want to just dabble a bit in religion. Jesus may have wanted to create a crisis for those who surrounded him, so they might realize the radical nature of his claims!

We need to eat in order to survive! Years back, Wiley Brooks a rail-thin man from Marin founded the San Rafael-based "Breatharian Institute." He claimed, "The body doesn't live on food but on energy. That energy, everything we need to live, is all around us in a perfect state in the air we breathe." As a Breatharian, Brooks claimed his "diet of gases" increased his strength tenfold. He said, "Food is a foreign, toxic substance.

As soon as you cut yourself free of that addiction, you can *really start living!*” Some people actually took Brooks seriously until a reporter spied him scarfing down a Big Mac and fries at a local MacDonald’s! On second thought I guess gases alone aren’t enough!

Just as we need to eat to eat, so we need to partake of Christ to live spiritually. How do we receive Jesus as “the bread of life?” By personal faith! Jesus says it’s through believing in him that we appropriate the benefits he offers us through his death and resurrection. He said, “everyone who believes in me will never thirst” so that when he said previously, “everyone who comes to me will never hunger” it’s just another way of saying “coming to Christ in faith,” an example of Hebrew parallelism where a thought is repeated in slightly different words.

A sick hospital patient isn’t helped by having an I.V. bag hanging next to their bed unless it’s hooked up to the patient. In the same way a starving person desperate for food will not be helped by the most delicious meal possible unless he or she eats it. In the same way Jesus Christ, the bread of life, is unable to

rescue or redeem us, unless we appropriate his promises by personal faith, unless we believe in him! We must take Christ into the center of our lives and “feed on him.”

Deep in Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse he abruptly switched metaphors and began talking about his own life in terms of flesh and blood. In v.51 he promises “whoever eats of this bread (by believing) will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” This has made biblical interpreters wonder, “what’s going on?” If you’ve carefully studied John’s Gospel, you know that one thing John does not include is a description of the last supper, including Jesus’ eucharistic words over the bread and cup. Is it possible that the last part of this discourse is John’s account of the eucharist?

Jesus’ Jewish audience is troubled by the mention of his flesh which sounds cannibalistic! “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus responds (v.53-55) “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day;

for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." The literal drinking of blood is prohibited by the purity code of Leviticus 7:26-27 and eating human flesh was as repugnant to the Greco-Roman world as to the Jewish religion.

What then does Jesus mean by "eating his flesh and drinking his blood?" I think Jesus is once again using metaphorical language to encourage his hearers to believe in him. And if you think about it - we use similar language today. We call ruthless employers "bloodsuckers" and challenge the envious to "eat their heart out."

Does this metaphorical language about "eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood" also refer in a secondary way to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, to the Eucharist? I think it does.

Does this mean that we are saved by partaking in this sacred meal? No. In the bread of life discourse there are eight explicit uses of the verb "to believe" in Jesus as the way to eternal life! So this is not a case of participation in the Sacrament as a way to earn your salvation. Rather, eating and drinking are Jesus' words about receiving his offer of eternal life

by believing in him! So we can spiritually feast on Christ apart from the Lord's Supper. As Augustine once commented, "Why do you provide for your teeth and your stomach? Believe, and you have eaten."

For Presbyterians or Reformed Christians, the Sacrament of the Eucharist allows us to feed spiritually though not physically on the body and blood of Christ. This "spiritual feeding" happens through the Holy Spirit, who in the words of the 16th century Second Helvetic Confession, "applies and bestows upon us these things which have been prepared for us by the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood for us, namely, the remission of sins, deliverance, and eternal life; so that Christ lives in us and we live in him, and he causes us to receive him by true faith to this end, that he may become for us such spiritual food and drink, that is, our life" (5.189; The Book of Confessions).

So as we partake of the Sacrament this morning we are acting out our desire to spiritually feed on the body and blood of Jesus as represented by the bread and the juice.

Is Jesus your spiritual staple, your "bread?" Is he at the center of your life or on the periphery, a mere after-thought? Friends, if you have fed on the risen Christ spiritually by faith, then you are welcome to feast here at his table. 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. . . . Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your Son Jesus Christ not as the provider of bread, but as the bread himself. Receiving him by faith may we spiritually partake of his body and blood in the Sacrament, as You remind us once again of the depth of Your love for us in Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.