

*I Am the Bread of Life*

John 6:35, 47-51

Ash Wednesday 2-14-24

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Are you giving up anything for Lent? I've decided that the cupboards in the parsonage are too full, and I've only been here a month. Some of this I brought with me from Minneapolis. So, during Lent, I'm going to discipline myself to look first at what is already on my shelves. I can't guarantee that some of the items haven't passed their "best if eaten by" date, but that will be part of the adventure.

Because I don't want my Lenten discipline to be all about me giving up things, I want to add some things too. I want to remember those folks who don't always know where their next meal is coming from. I'll be looking to make donations to a local food shelf. Since I'm new in town, any suggestions you have would be greatly appreciated. And finally, I'm going to spend time in prayer, asking God to help me learn to be more content with what I already have.

A discipline like this could be a bit of a game-changer, at least that's what I'm hoping. Not only do I have too many items in my cupboard, I have too many books on my shelves, too many emails in my inbox, too many clothes in my and on and on. The fact of the matter is, it can be hard to find contentment with so much stuff cluttering up my life. Does any of this resonate with you?

The inspiration for this Lenten discipline comes from Jesus. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says, "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Hunger was a big deal for Jesus. He was concerned about the poor, the widows, the foreigners. I picture him caring for crowds in long and desperate food lines like the ones we see in Gaza. Jesus made sure that hungry crowds got fed. Still, I don't think Jesus was speaking only about physical hunger. He was also speaking to our deeper hungers, and to our trust – or lack thereof – that God will provide for our needs.

In our gospel for tonight, Jesus is addressing the crowds. He recently fed 5000 of them with five barley loaves and a couple of fish. There was enough for everyone, and leftovers besides. And there was contentment for the time being.

It wasn't long before the people were ready to hail Jesus as their king. In Jewish teaching at the time, there was a belief that when Messiah – their king – comes, he would feed his people bread. I can picture the people lining up to get ready.

Jesus avoids the crowds, though, at least for now. He hightails it to the mountains to spend time in prayer, while his disciples head off to their fishing boats. You might know this story. A sudden storm blows in. The disciples are scared to death. Would you believe, Jesus comes walking to them on the water. He says to them, "I AM, don't be afraid," as the waves come crashing in over the side. He doesn't calm the storm, but he does stay with them, to help them make it safely through.

Morning comes. The disciples are back on the shore. The crowd notices that Jesus is in the boat with his disciples, even though he didn't leave with them. Now the crowd is even more impressed with this man from Galilee. And once again they start clamoring for bread.

Jesus speaks to their cravings: "Are you looking for contentment? I'll tell you where you can find it. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Like a lot of things Jesus says to the crowds, this leaves them scratching their heads. Never be hungry again? No need for a fresh loaf every now and then? Jesus has this way of taking the ordinary stuff of life and turning it into something deeper. *Jesus, what are you trying to tell them—and us?*

I think the key to what Jesus is saying can be found in his "I AM" statement: "I am the bread of life." Jesus has a number of these statements in the Gospel of John: "I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth, and the life." Every time Jesus says *I AM*, he's making a connection with the divine name in the OT – *Yahweh*. It means literally, "I am who I am." By using this name, Jesus is giving them a great big hint: "If you're looking for God, you can start with me. I am the One who can provide the contentment you so desperately need."

I wonder if the crowds believed Jesus. I wonder if we believe him. After all, we go looking for contentment in all sorts of places, and we don't always start with Jesus. Look back at the Super Bowl commercials. Any number of \$7M thirty-second ads.

In contrast to those glitzy commercials, Jesus is more like a street vendor going door-to-door pedaling his message. “Find contentment here,” the street vendor says, “Spend a moment with me.” He’s knocking on doors, offering his wares: an hour of peace, a smile of acceptance, a sigh of relief.

But alas, his goods are so seldom taken. Why? Because, quite frankly, we’re often too busy to be content. “Not now,” we say, “I’ve got too much to do,”

The street vendor walks on, knocking on more doors. “Find contentment here,” he cries, “Never be hungry again.” People stop what they’re doing to listen, but only half-heartedly. “I promise you hearts that are full, peace that is real, a life rich with purpose.”

“Not now,” we say, “I’m not all that hungry. My life is filled up with other things. Come back tomorrow. Maybe I’ll be hungry then.” Here’s the problem: the street vendor has to compete with some of the highest-IQ people in the world. They stay up late at night dreaming up all sorts of ways to convince us that we are nothing more than a collection of appetites. See. Want. Buy. Eat.

Still, the street vendor keeps trudging along. He keeps calling out to us: “Find contentment here.” When a bystander asks him why so few welcome him into their lives, his answer leaves the person convicted: “I charge a high price. I ask people to trade in their schedules and anxieties and frustrations. I urge them to stop their endless running and sleepless nights. In return, I offer them the simple bread of contentment.”

The street vendor pauses for a moment and scratches his beard. “The bread I’m offering might not be the tastiest you can find, but it’s incredibly satisfying. You’d think I’d have more buyers. But people seem strangely proud of their headaches and ulcers and jam-packed schedules.”

The street vendor is momentarily discouraged. But he redoubles his effort and keeps going. He has a message that needs to be heard. So he presses on, hoping that people like you and me will heed his call and buy some of his bread.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus calls to us this Lent. If you want to stop being hungry, start by spending some time with me. I am the One who can provide the contentment you need.”

So, where can we find this contentment? I have three simple suggestions for you: 1) Spend time in the Word. You can start with our Lenten devotions. They will help you listen for a voice from beyond. They will remind you that love makes a way, even when it seems like there is no way. 2) Practice unplugging your phone. Turn it off for an hour or two or three. Our phones are addictive. They don't lead to contentment, but just the opposite. And 3) Get in the habit of saying, "It could be worse." This can be a powerful exercise.

You get in your car in the morning. It doesn't matter if it's ten years old and starting to rust. *It could be worse.* You have an iPhone that's not always dependable. You could buy a new one or maybe get your old one repaired. *It could be worse.* If you happen to be married, and you're tempted to trade in your spouse for a newer, shinier model, look into your spouse's eyes this Valentine's Day and say with conviction, *It could be worse.* Okay, you might not want to say that out loud. But who knows, your spouse may be thinking the same thing about you.

Someone once wrote: "The good life exists only when we stop wanting a better one. It's the condition of savoring what is, rather than longing for what might be. The itch for things, so brilliantly injected by those who make and sell them is, in effect, a virus draining the soul of contentment. A person never earns enough, clothes are never new enough, a student is never smart enough, the house is never furnished enough. There is a point at which salvation lies in stepping off the escalator and saying, "Enough!" What I have will do and what I make of it is up to me."

My friends, what kind of bread have you been eating lately? Is it the bread of contentment, the bread of life? If not, I know of a street vendor who's pedaling just what you need. And if you listen closely this Lent, you might just hear him calling your name. Amen.