

“When God Shares Bread”
John 6:35, 41-51
Preached on August 8, 2021
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We are in the midst of a “gluten-heavy” series of Gospel readings in the current lectionary cycle. You may have noticed that this is our third straight week in the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, a chapter that began with Jesus’ feeding of the crowds with the loaves and fishes. We’ve now transitioned into a long discourse about, among other things, bread.

The timing works out quite well for me in my capacity as a program director preparing for a new year, because now I have an excuse to tell you about the new kids formation class we’ll be starting in a few weeks, called “Bake with the Bible.” The class will give kids the chance to bake various breads, right here in our parish hall, following recipes such as “Kitchen Sink Flatbread” and “Honey Coriander Crackers.” Along the way we’ll use each recipe to help us explore a story from the Bible. So if you’re a 2nd, 3rd, 4th or 5th grader, I look forward to seeing you in the kitchen in a few weeks. Or if you’re a grown-up who loves baking — maybe you spent time honing your skills during lockdown — I hope you’ll get in touch with me so you can be a part of the team of adult leaders for this class.

In the passage of scripture at hand, Jesus declares: “I am the bread of life” and “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” Now, any statement Jesus makes that begins with the words “I am” should immediately draw our attention. These words are a not-so-subtle way for Jesus to announce his divinity. “I am” was the first divine name revealed to the Hebrew people. These were and are sacred words.

What follows these sacred words is also packed with meaning: “I am the bread of life.” What an interesting metaphor. Of all the things Jesus could point to in order to tell us something about who he is, he chooses...bread. Bread: the enemy of carb-counting keto- and paleo-dieters. Bread: that glorious vessel for peanut butter and jelly that (at least for the more selective eaters among us) requires the tedious work of crust removal.

But Jesus isn’t just comparing himself to bread in a generic way — he has a specific *kind* of bread in mind; that is, manna, the thin, sweet wafer which God gave to the starving Israelites who had just escaped Egypt. In Hebrew Manna means “what is it?” — this was the question on the lips of the Israelites as they walked around the desert picking up this mysterious snack. Manna was the *first* bread to come down from heaven. It descended from the sky to cover the desert ground each morning.

In sending Manna, God reveals a bit more of his nature to us. We learn that God is a God who shares food — who shares his abundance with humanity. God is a God who says: “Are you hungry? I can help you with that.” God gathers hungry people together, God provides the bread, and life is sustained. It’s a gracious act which eventually becomes a reliable, clearly discernible pattern of God’s interactions with humanity. The ruler of the universe is generous and compassionate. Pretty good news, right?

But that just leaves us with one question: what does Jesus have to do with any of this? What does it mean for Jesus to declare that he is “Living Bread,” living manna?

I worked at a Panera Bread restaurant for a couple of months during seminary. There I discovered that Panera is more than just a fast-casual cafe-bakery that serves delicious soups and sandwiches; they are corporate evangelists committed to spreading the gospel of gluten. They even used to make new employees watch these videos about how bread is the oldest

culinary creation in human history, how every cultural group of humans on earth bakes bread, therefore bread must hold the key to world peace and prosperity (this is the propaganda I was forced to sit through as a Panera employee). I mean these people truly believe that sharing bread will change the world.

One of Panera's trademark practices is to donate leftover baked goods at the end of the day to local non-profits. When I worked the closing shift, I got to hand off the donation box to whoever was doing that night's pick-up. I liked being the person to make the hand off — you feel like you're doing some good in the world, keeping something from going to waste — I was proud to be helping my employer make a difference. Closing up the bakery one particular evening, I met the contact person for a local organization that fed the homeless. She had come to collect that night's haul of leftovers, which she would distribute to homeless folks on the streets the next morning, along with hot coffee. Everything was ready to go, and I slid the box across the counter, expecting an enthusiastic "Thank you!" But as this woman surveyed what was in the donation box that night — mostly leftover bagels — her face fell. She said, "Well this won't help us very much. I don't think I even want it." Caught off-guard, I think to myself "it's free bread, people who are starving can't be picky." I asked her what the problem was. She replied, "My friends can't chew day-old bagels; they don't have enough teeth." Suddenly I felt naive and embarrassed. I realized that I didn't have a clue what it really meant to "share bread" with the hungry in the way that this woman did.

In the desert, God shared bread with his people — God *provided* manna. He met the need. But now, in Christ, a different kind of "sharing" has taken place. We learn something further about the kind of god God is. Turns out, God is not content to just sit back in heaven and send off charitable donations of manna; this is not enough. In Christ, God comes to us himself — to *be with* us in the flesh, to join us at the table, to eat and drink with us, to sit down on the sidewalk, sip coffee and chew day-old bagels with us. This is the *Living* Manna, Living Bread. Bread that allows for mutual intimate knowing. Bread that makes us not just objects of God's mercy but God's companions: *friends, even*. Bread that *forges a relationship that even the grave cannot sever*; it creates an identity that neither sin nor death can erase. When God breaks bread with someone, nothing can remain the way it was before. A different kind of life has begun.

Just as the angel came to Elijah, touched him and said "Get up and eat," God invites us even today to eat with him, to enjoy his company, and to reaffirm our identity as his beloved. Christ has revealed a whole new dimension of divine generosity — not just giving out of abundance, but giving of one's self.

Jesus said, "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."

Surely in these trying times, *this* is Good News.

Amen.