

The Bread of Life
John 6: 22-35
March 6, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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When I was three or four years old, my father found me sitting on the porch step crying. He asked me what was wrong, and I said, "I'm afraid there is a rule I don't know about that I've been breaking."

I have been an adult for a long time now, and still, the easiest way to torture me is to give me unclear or conflicting sets of expectations. Several years ago, I was really ill for a long time, and I ended up seeing both my primary care provider and a specialist, and they gave me totally conflicting instructions. It made my head explode. Even at nearly 72 years old, I still want to know what the rules are, and I need them to be unambiguous. It is hard for me to confess this, but if I had lived in Jesus' day, I probably would have made a really good Pharisee, since living up to the rules was what they cared so much about.

Now, I hope you remember that earlier this year, when we began our study of the Gospel of John, I told you that it was entirely different from the Gospel of Luke, that we studied last spring. I said that we would come to some passages in John that would make you say, "Wait, what?" Well, this is one of those passages for me, because the message in today's scripture is right at the heart of the whole Gospel of John, and it is exactly opposite of all that we learned from Luke.

The Gospel of Luke is all about Jesus' care for those who are poor and sick and oppressed. In the opening sermon of his ministry in Luke, Jesus quotes the beautiful passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In Luke we read Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, where he blesses those who are poor and hungry – not those who are poor in spirit, mind you, but those who are just plain poor – and he gives woes to those who are rich and well fed. Luke shows us over and over again that God is on the side of those who have little in this world, and Luke teaches us that to do God's work is to feed hungry people and speak out for those who are oppressed. Luke doesn't promise us that we will end poverty or hunger by our efforts, but for Luke it is clear that the whole purpose of our lives should be to alleviate the suffering of those who have less than we do. Luke is a gospel that is engaged with the world, because God is engaged with the world.

And now this spring we are reading the Gospel of John, which in many ways is my favorite gospel. Its picture of Jesus as the Word of God, who spoke creation into being, just takes my breath away. The glory of God shines through everything that Jesus does in this Gospel. Jesus does miracles, like changing water into wine, or feeding 5,000 people, or walking on water, even miracles like healing sick people, but these are not shown to us to demonstrate God's compassion, as in Luke. No, in this gospel they are shown to us as signs that Jesus is God Incarnate. We are supposed to read these signs and come to see Jesus as Emmanuel, God with Us. There is no call in John for us to be involved in setting right all that is wrong with the world. There is just this call to believe. In John, doing God's work means simply believing that Jesus is the Christ.

Wait, what?

So, in today's reading, all the thousands of people that Jesus fed just yesterday up on the mountainside find him again today and ask for more food. Real food. They are still poor, still hungry, and Jesus says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." And "I am the Bread of Life."

Here is this gorgeous image of Jesus as the Bread of Life, the bread that will satisfy our deepest hunger forever. And I so want to live with Christ on that high plain, where all hunger is spiritual hunger. My heart yearns for that kind of relationship with God. At the same time, right in front of Jesus are these people who can't understand what he is saying, not because they lack faith but because they lack food, and hungry bellies come before almost everything else. We can't explore the higher reaches of our consciousness if we haven't met our bodies' basic needs.

So here we have two pictures of Jesus, one from Luke and one from John. Luke offers us a really challenging theology about wealth and power and privilege (OUR wealth, OUR power, OUR privilege) vs. the hunger and poverty and oppression of the whole world. Luke's gospel is challenging for us precisely because we have warm homes and enough to eat. Luke offers us a clear choice – either be on God's side in meeting the needs of those who have less than you do, or get out of the way, and woe be to you. John, on the other hand, gives us a picture of Jesus that only those who are privileged can relate to – those of us who have had enough to eat, and who still have a yearning that food doesn't satisfy. John's gospel points us to this Jesus who

transcends all time and space, who is light in a world of darkness, who is bread for our souls, Jesus who is to be worshipped.

And my four-year-old self, the one that is afraid of breaking rules she doesn't know about, that little girl in me wants to shout, "Well, which is it? Am I supposed to be out there feeding hungry people as Luke says, or in here worshipping Jesus, as John calls me to do? What is it that God expects of me?"

What does God expect of all of us?

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We need to remember that the gospels were all written down several decades after Jesus' death, based on the stories and memories and sayings that were handed down in the particular community to which they were written. Because there weren't phones back then, or TV, or internet, stories were shared primarily orally, within individual communities, and over time the stories in one early Christian community began to diverge from those in other Christian communities that were just a few miles away, all based on the same original events, but remembering and retelling the parts of that story that meant most to each community. So, when we read gospel accounts that differ markedly from one another, we have to use our broader understanding of the Bible and what we know from our own personal experience of God to decide how to interpret these differences.

I have to tell you, as much as I love the Gospel of John, and I really do, in this case I am rooted in the Gospel of Luke. The Jesus I know – the Jesus I believe in – would not have looked hungry people in the eye and said that their hunger didn't matter. He would have fed them. He would have asked us to help feed them, too.

We, who have enough to eat, come to this communion table with spiritual hunger, seeking the bread that satisfies hungry hearts. I am so grateful to be able to receive this communion bread as spiritual food, knowing we will all go home to a fridge and a pantry with still more there to eat. We can receive this bread in the way the Gospel of John intends, as food for our souls.

So, this morning, when communion comes, let us receive this precious Bread of Life and let it nourish our souls. Let it feed our spirits. Let it connect us to the Christ who transcends all time and space, who is the very face of God in human form. Let us feel the blessing of the Christ himself in this meal.

And then, with our spirits nourished, let us continue to feed those whose bodies are hungry. Give to each what they need. Bring a can of beans for the Food Pantry each month. Or donate to Church World Service and other agencies that respond to disasters. Or do something to solve one of the problems that trap people in poverty. Or bake a loaf of bread and take it to someone who is lonely, then sit a while and share stories with them. Or make soup for a relative who is ill, and plump her pillow before you leave. Reach out to someone who needs you. Feed their bodies. Feed their spirits.

The Bread of Life, this amazing gift of Christ's own self, nourishes our souls. May we share that blessing with everyone we meet. Amen