

Nourished by the Bread of Life: A Whole New You

John 6:56-69

This morning we come to the conclusion of this sermon series on being Nourished by the Bread of Life. Together, we have journeyed through the 6th chapter of John's Gospel, and been fed with Jesus' unfolding teaching on the Bread that comes down from Heaven. We've witnessed Jesus feeding over 5000 people with just three loaves of barley bread; and sailed with the crowds who followed him across the Sea of Galilee the next day, hoping for another free meal. We've seen Jesus turn their dogged pursuit of more bread for their bellies into a lesson about chasing food for their souls. He encouraged them to not work solely for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life. When they asked what they must do to have this Bread of Life, Jesus answered that all they needed to do was to believe in him. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life; 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." As I said last week, this was Jesus' "you are what you eat" message. Or, you could call it Jesus' "Bread of Life Diet."

It's a known fact that our physical health is determined by the quantity and quality of the foods we put into our body. There are foods which contribute to strong bodies and foods that sabotage good health. Our taste buds and our food cravings alone are *not* dependable guides to good nutrition and healthy bodies. Diets come and go, each one developed to determine the best foods for promoting optimal physical wellbeing.

The Atkins Diet identifies carbs as the villain behind health problems and unhealthy weight gain; so, cutting carbs is the strategy it advocates for better health. The South Beach Diet claims that weight loss and healthy bodies are best obtained by limiting unhealthy fats and encouraging the consumption of grains, fruits and vegetables. The Paleo Diet mimics what humans ate 2.5 million years ago--foods that our ancestors might have hunted, fished, and gathered--and avoiding foods that weren't common until farming began. Then there's the Tom Brady TB12 Diet, which, while once wildly popular around these parts, has lately become a source of indigestion. Some people put their faith in one diet after another, in a futile quest for a magic formula that will transform them into the slim and healthy specimen they long to be. Some people stick with a diet and work at it faithfully.

There were also a variety of responses to the Bread of Life Diet that Jesus endorsed. When he said that he was the Bread of Life that came down from Heaven to bring life to the world, people shook their heads and scoffed at the notion that this Jesus—who they watched grow up from a little boy—could claim to have descended to earth from Heaven.

When Jesus told people that partaking of the Bread of Life Diet meant eating his body and drinking his blood, many of them took his words literally, and were repulsed by the thought of something so unnatural. So, they closed their ears and minds to his message. Many of Jesus' own disciples, those who *had* already committed themselves to following him, could not bring themselves to swallow such a difficult message as this. So, they parted ways with him.

At last, Jesus turned to his inner circle of twelve disciples and asked them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have *come to believe and know* that you are the Holy One of God." I don't think that Peter, James, John and the others got what Jesus was trying to say because they were brighter or better than any of the people who gave up on Jesus that day. In fact, we know for certain that they weren't. They were already building up their own lengthy track record of getting Jesus' messages wrong and missing the point he was trying to make.

What distinguished them from those others who turned their backs on Jesus was not how well they comprehended what Jesus said. It was the depth with which they *trusted* Jesus, even when they didn't fully understand. A faith in Jesus had taken root in them based on all they had experienced of him to that point in time. And an intimacy that hungered for—but did not demand—understanding, as a prerequisite for following him. They might not have been able to fully comprehend or articulate what Jesus meant when he spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, but their faith preceded understanding. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have *come to believe and know* that you are the Holy One of God."

To this day, Christians still struggle to articulate the mystery of what it means that Jesus is the Bread of Life. And what it is that we mean when we eat the bread and drink the wine of Communion and declare them to be the body and the blood of Jesus. Yet, despite these questions, we remain convinced that Jesus is the Holy One of God and that his words are words of eternal life. So, we too have come to believe that in the sacrament of Holy Communion, Christians hear, taste, touch and receive the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ, who is truly and rightly present to those who eat and drink, in a way that defies intellectual comprehension.

In Communion we celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ in the present moment. And, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history. Near the end of the Holy Land Pilgrimage that some of us were fortunate enough to go on just before the pandemic began, we visited the Garden Tomb outside of Jerusalem. It is one of the places that claims to be the location where Jesus was buried after his crucifixion and from which he rose on Easter morning. In a shady spot within sight of the opening to the tomb, we shared a simple Communion service. And as we ate the bread and drank the fruit of the vine there, the words of Jesus seemed to reverberate off the stony façade of the dusty tomb. "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.*"

Jesus came offering a diet intended not only for those who understood everything about it, but for those who would receive it in faith. To those who come to believe that he is the Son of God and that his words are words of eternal life. A diet whose signature ingredient is the sacrifice that he made for the life of the world. The objective of this diet of his own body and blood isn't to eliminate carbs, or fats or processed foods that stand between us and optimal physical wellbeing. It is a way of minimizing whatever stands in the way of our experiencing the fullness of God's love for us, and maximizing our stamina for reflecting that love to others. It's not a food plan for living longer and healthier lives. It is God's plan for gracing us with eternal life. Its greatest satisfaction is not discovered in how other people notice the cosmetic fruits of our labors, but in the noticeable shift in the way the fruits of the Spirit shine through out attitudes towards others. It is not measured in the number of pounds that the scale tells us we have lost, but in the ways we add the weight of our witness to tipping the scales of justice. It doesn't guarantee a lesser distance around the circumference of your waist line, but it does promise to reduce the distance between you and God, and you and your neighbor.

Like any diet, though, it only works as well as you work it. This Bread of Life Diet works if we make a habit of consuming a consistent menu of regular worship, attention to time devoted to scripture and prayer, and an exercise routine that strengthens us for acts of compassion, generosity, humility and peace. Being nourished by the Bread of Life is not a formula for body sculpting our way to looking better on the outside. It is a "from the inside out" total remaking of who we are. A plan for a whole new you. And a whole new me. And through the changes in us, a promise of a whole new tomorrow for all of God's Creation.

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