



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“I Am the Bread of Life”

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John 6:30-35

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God wants to be known.

We discovered last week in Moses’s encounter with the burning bush how much God wants to be known. *God is a God of relationship.* The assurance Moses received is that “I AM will be with you.” Though we cannot be certain of the entirety of meaning conveyed in the identity of *I AM*, there is a clear promise that the God who *was* and *is* and *will be* is the God who is *with us*. The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Jacob and Rachel, the God of Samuel and Deborah and David and Esther and Mary and Paul, is the same God who is with us now. And our God wants to be known to us and by us.

Seven times in the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded as identifying himself beginning with the words *I am*. Each of these sayings serves as a self-revelation of Jesus’s identity, and together they form the self-revelative framework of the story of Jesus as told by John. Today, we focus on a passage from the sixth chapter: “I am the bread of life.”

To fully grasp the situation in which Jesus identified himself this way, we need to understand the surrounding context in John. The day before, Jesus had gone across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, climbed up a rise, and sat down with them. From there, they looked out and could see a huge crowd coming toward them. Ordinarily, in a growing movement, gaining a significant following is a good thing. But Jesus knew the reason they were coming to see him was not because of God’s presence manifest in him, but to see him perform miracles and healings as he had done in other places.

What happened next is the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000, but John’s telling is different from that of the synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this occurring after a long day of Jesus’s teaching in a remote location, and in each circumstance the disciples urge Jesus to send the crowd away because they have no means to feed them. Here, Jesus looks up at the approaching crowd, and asks Philip, “Where will we buy food for these people?”

Philip, astounded that Jesus was looking for a grocery store instead of thinking about his bank account, replied, “Jesus, more than half a year’s salary wouldn’t buy enough to feed all these people!”

As in the other tellings, Andrew comically grabs some kid’s lunch and offers it to Jesus. “This is all we’ve got, and it isn’t going to go very far.”

To which Jesus replies, “Just watch.” And you know how the rest of the story goes. Jesus blesses the five loaves and two fish, divides them and begins to pass them around. By the end, everyone has eaten their fill, and the disciples gather up twelve baskets of leftovers.

The people were so astounded at what had just happened that they wanted to make Jesus king then and there. But he pulled away from them because their intentions were wrong. Jesus provided for them so God’s presence would be revealed through him. But he knew *they* were drawn to celebrity and miracles, that they wanted a king who would wow people with raw power. Jesus wanted none of that, so he withdrew by himself to a quiet place.

The next day, Jesus was reunited with the disciples back on the other side of the lake at Capernaum (how they got there is another famous story for another time). The crowd followed them *again*, looking for another big moment. Again, Jesus knew that they weren’t there to see God revealed in him, but because they were drawn to his miraculous acts. He said, “You’ve only come here because I fed you all you wanted yesterday. Don’t work for the food that consumed and then gone, but for the food that lasts for eternity.”

“But what are you going to do for us, Jesus? Show us a sign so we can believe in you! Moses gave our ancestors bread in the desert. What will you do for us?” (A pretty ridiculous claim from the very people Jesus had miraculously fed just the day before.)

Jesus redirected their attention. “You’re missing the point. It wasn’t *Moses* who gave your ancestors that bread, but God. *God* is the one you should be seeking, not a human hero. The bread from heaven gives life to the world.”

“Then give us this bread all the time!”

And then he says it. “I am the bread of life.” Our minds turn to Moses at the burning bush: *I AM*. But we also recall the claim John made at the beginning of his Gospel, chapter one, verse 18: “No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made God known.” You want to see God? Look at Jesus. You want to have the bread that will last for eternity? Come to Jesus. Jesus is the living presence of God, the God we can know, revealing God’s character and the length God goes to be in relationship with us. *I am the bread of life*.

God wants to be known. That is the point of the incarnation. God wants to be close to us. Or as John put it in verse twelve of his opening chapter, God invites us to believe so that we can be God’s children, God’s own offspring. We can know God as closely as a member of our own family. Now, that’s an extraordinary revelation. Pity we’ve heard it so often that we miss just how extraordinary it is. Like the crowds in Galilee, we skip past spiritual matters, so convinced are we that material possessions will make us happy, not closeness with the God who transforms and transcends the things we put so much stock into in this life.

On the rare occasion I’m at home in the evening, maybe watching a ballgame or just hanging out with the family, I’ll find myself hankering for a snack. Maybe you do this, too. I’m not really hungry, per se, just peckish. So I’ll venture to the kitchen and peruse the cupboards – chips, dried fruit, some leftover candy from a Christmas stocking. Then I’ll cross the room, open the fridge, and strike the iconic pose, scanning for something to magically appear that I want. Inevitably, I’ll land on something, or maybe two somethings, and munch away, though that rarely takes away the feeling. That’s because, of course, I wasn’t really hungry – just tired or bored or fidgety. There’s a difference between being *full* and being *satisfied*.

We spend a lot of effort trying to be filled. We fill our calendars with work and meetings and lessons and shopping and outings (if we have any time left for others). We accumulate wealth and material possessions and pleasurable activities. But how much do those things actually bring us joy? In his book *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are not substitutes for joy.”¹ Our material pursuits not only lead us away from joy; they keep us from experiencing the life God wants for us... and for others.

Many factors impact our health. Weight is one of them. Being overweight leads to higher instances of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type-2 diabetes, and more. In the U. S., two-thirds of adults and one-third of children are overweight or obese.² Poverty is a major factor. Counties with poverty rates greater than 35% have obesity rates 145% higher than wealthier counties.³ Having less money might lead one to expect there would be less to eat, causing poorer people to be underfed. But the issue here is one of *access*.

In Cleveland, rated in 2019 as the poorest large city in the U.S.,⁴ food access and nutrition is a major problem. 59% of Cleveland residents live in a “food desert,”⁵ meaning they have little or no direct access to healthy, nutritious food. As a result, people living in these neighborhoods eat what is readily and affordably available – processed food with long shelf life, food that is notoriously high in carbohydrates, and fast food. They may be able to fill their stomachs, but what they fill them *with* lacks nutritional value. There’s a difference between being *full* and being *satisfied*. That’s why programs like the Glenville Food Lab at the Cory-Glenville Community Center are so important – providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables and healthier options for people who otherwise might not be able to get them.

But the larger key to addressing nutritional disparities is addressing poverty. By many measures, the United States is the wealthiest nation in the world. And yet the poverty rate is near the highest among developed countries. Consider that France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Sweden each have poverty rates less than half of ours.⁶

How many of us have more than we need while others barely have enough just to survive? We spend a great deal of our time being filled, without necessarily being more satisfied. Perhaps it’s not just about having what we want, but living in a world that is closer to the way God intends it to be. We have the means. We have the example. Do we have the will?

¹ C. S. Lewis. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich (1966), 170.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK209844/>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3198075/>

⁴ <https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/briefs/cleveland-now-ranks-as-the-poorest-big-city-in-the-united-states/>

⁵ <https://www.countyplanning.us/projects/creating-healthy-communities/>

⁶ <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/581829-a-breakdown-of-poverty-in-america-is-a-mirror-to-the-nations-reality?rl=1>

When Jesus performed healing and feeding miracles, he was revealing God's presence in him. But he was also revealing God's character and God's heart – feeding the hungry, tending the hurting, lifting up the downtrodden. It wasn't just to attract followers, but to instruct them – and us – in the ways of God.

But like the crowd in Galilee, we're prone to seek out power and success and prosperity. We like a star, a hero – a celebrity, politician, or even...a pastor – someone who will do *for us* what we want. What we should be doing is seeking to embody the presence of the One who is the source of every good thing. Lent is a good time to practice the disciplines that lead us into a more substantive faith, a faith that helps us grow deeper in our walk with Christ, not just an hour on Sunday or a few minutes of prayer for our needs. God doesn't want us to fill up on spiritual fast food, but to feast on a gourmet meal that satisfies. Jesus said that he came so we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). Instead of looking for the God we think we want, let's be attentive for God to reveal to us the Savior we need. God doesn't want to overawe us with miracles and acts of power. God wants to know us and to be known by us.

In this season, let's step back from our appetites for vicarious heroes. Instead, let's practice being in the presence of the God whose heart and mission are revealed in Jesus Christ. He is the bread of life. Filled with Christ, our spiritual hunger and our thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. And that's a gift we can share with the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.