

John 6.24-40  
Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ann J. Deibert  
Central Presbyterian Church  
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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

### “I am the Bread of Life”

Incipit: Preaching from John’s gospel often calls for some discussion about the language that the writer of the gospel puts in Jesus’ mouth. Jesus in the Gospel of John addresses God as Father more than any of the other gospels. Now for some people that’s a wonderful image for God for other people, it’s a problematic image.

If you’ve heard me preach on John’s gospel before, you’ve heard me quote Gail O’Day, who teaches New Testament at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. She says that Jesus’ reference to God as Father in John’s gospel has nothing to do with reinforcing the claims of patriarchy or upholding an image of God as a controlling or abusive father. She says the relationship Jesus upholds in John’s gospel between God the Father and Jesus the Son is one of a parent and a beloved child.<sup>1</sup>

O’Day says that the Fourth Evangelist uses “Father and Son” as the “language of intimacy, relationship and family. From the very beginning of the Gospel, the explicit purpose of Jesus’ ministry has been to create a new family of God”<sup>2</sup>—which includes us as children of God.

O’Day says that “Father” is an essential name for God in John’s gospel—because of the relationship of intimacy and belovedness it points to between God and Jesus. O’Day says that “the church’s task...is to move beyond the assumption that ‘Father’ is a generic synonym for ‘God’.”<sup>3</sup> Pretending that we can call God God or Father and it all means the same thing.

I find what O’Day has to say compelling and so this morning I will read the passage from John’s gospel mostly as it’s written—leaving in some of the Father and Son language. I will also change a few of the Fathers to Mother. That isn’t a 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent but in our day I think to include both parents in the language of intimacy and belovedness is appropriate.

Also in this passage we hear Jesus refer to himself in the third person as the “Son of Man.” Let me say a word about how John uses that term because it’s really different than when we hear it in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

“The Son of Man in the synoptic gospels [Matthew, Mark and Luke] is associated with Jesus’ suffering and death...and future coming.” For “John the Son of Man is the one who bridges the distance between heaven and earth.”<sup>4</sup> The meaning of “Son of Man” in the fourth gospel points to the “incarnation as the way in which God is made known to God’s people.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gail O’Day, “John” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IX, Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, p496.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from O’Day and her reference to John 1.12-13 “John” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, p304.

<sup>3</sup> O’Day, *NIB*, p496.

<sup>4</sup> John 1.51.

<sup>5</sup> O’Day, *NIB*, p532.

Now to set the particular context of this passage (and we're almost ready to read the scripture!). Last Sunday, Mark preached on the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 from the seemingly small offering of five loaves and two fish.

After everyone is fed, Jesus and the disciples cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee toward the town of Capernaum.

The next day the crowd goes looking for Jesus. They're probably wondering if they can get another free lunch and don't want to miss out on whatever other goodies Jesus might provide. [John 6.24-40]

Back when my parents and their two daughters used to go camping in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, we would visit the great cavernous store known as Recreational Equipment, Incorporated—or REI.

At REI, you could find everything you would ever need for camping, hiking, skiing, kayaking, cycling or any other outdoor adventure.

Since I was the camp cook on our family camping trips, what fascinated me were all the foldable pans, the portable stoves, the multi-purpose utensils and the vacuum packed and dried food.

Now these were the days before everyone reconstituted soup with eight ounces of microwaved hot water in a waxed paper cup for lunch. These were the days when freeze dried beef stew was a wonder and an amazing dish to contemplate, at your picnic table at the state park under the Douglas Fir trees.

However, since we weren't serious hikers and since we drove our Volkswagen micro-bus to our camp site and unloaded all our cooking supplies, my parents never really thought we needed to spend all that money on freeze-dried when we could easily, and less expensively, tote along two pounds of ground beef in our cooler.

But...every once in a while on a trip to REI, mom and dad would give in and buy us the most fascinating food of all: freeze-dried ice cream. It was what the astronauts ate the shiny, foil package told us.

Freeze-dried ice cream is exactly how it sounds—weird. It had the texture of soft, chewable Styrofoam with a hint of chocolate or strawberry flavor. But we thought we were something—eating the food of the future—eating what the likes of Neil Armstrong ate as he walked on the moon—eating food that would last forever in its vacuum packed, shiny foil pouch.

This is the kind of thing I think about when Jesus talks about working for the food that endures for eternal life. What food would endure for eternal life? What is Jesus talking about when he says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you”? It wasn't the bread and fish handed out to the crowd by the Sea of Galilee.

The crowd was interested to know about this food that endures for eternal life. And no wonder. They were poor, probably farmers or day-laborers, people who worked very hard for the very little that they had. They would certainly like to get a basket full of the food that would last to eternal life so they wouldn't have to worry if they and their family would eat the next day. And Jesus knows that. He knows that they are thinking about how they could get a magic basket that always had food in it—a basket with bread and fish that stayed fresh and abundant day after day after day after day—the 1<sup>st</sup> century version of our vacuum-packed and freeze-dried.

They'd heard the stories of their great-great-great grandparents to whom God provided manna every morning. They'd love to have the bread that came from heaven—to be fed each morning by God's gracious and faithful provision.

But Jesus has something more in mind. "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

There are a lot of things in our lives that we use to try to satisfy our hungers and quench our thirsts. Some of that is physical food and drink. Some of that is the stuff we buy and accumulate that we hope will make us feel better, richer, smarter, sexier, calmer, more in control, more powerful, more together or whatever else. Some of it is our achievements or our job titles, our awards or our degrees or whatever else that we think will give us value in the eyes of others and worth in our own hearts and minds.

But most of that food is fleeting or it becomes a great looking outer layer. It's all wrapped up in a shiny foil pouch but our stomachs are still gnawing on themselves and we're dying of thirst.

What is the food that endures to eternal life? It is the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. In John's Gospel, this is Jesus—the Son of Man—"the one who bridges the distance between heaven and earth...who is the incarnation...[of] God...made known to God's people."<sup>6</sup>

But still, what does that mean? What does it look like in our lives?

I wonder if it doesn't have to do with living in the presence of God—and being aware of living in the presence of God. The presence of God made incarnate in Jesus.

And I wonder, if Jesus is the bread of life, if one of the ways we respond is to invite Jesus to be our eternal food—to be the One in whom our deepest hungers are satisfied and our deepest thirsts are quenched. Which would probably mean we'd need to let go of some of the things we have used to try and fill those hungers and thirsts and open our lives in such a way that the Bread of Life can feed us. Some of us have filled ourselves up with so much junk food that it takes a while to be really hungry again and to recover a taste for the bread that is most truly and deeply life-giving.

"I am the bread of life" says Jesus. "I am what you need. Not all that other stuff."

The poet Mary Karr in her poem "Disgraceland"<sup>7</sup> writes,

"You are loved, someone said.

Take that and eat it."

As we gather around this table today, the little piece of bread and the tiny swallow of juice isn't what will fill us up. But these elements point to the presence of Christ—the risen Jesus—the bread of life—who loves us, who feeds us and who gives us life.

"You are loved, someone said.

Take that and eat it."

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p532.

<sup>7</sup> Found in her latest collection of poems, *Sinners Welcome*.