
The Bread Of Life

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 14 - Year B
Mark 6:30-44

*Jesus said, "I am the bread of life.
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,
and I will raise them up on the last day." John 6. 51, 54*

"Taste and see that the Lord is good." Psalm 34. 8

Can any of you remember the smell of fresh bread in the house? I doubt that many of us still make bread by hand, and what a loss that is. We buy our daily bread already sliced and packaged. It takes no time at all to have it in our kitchen.

I remember. I still remember, as a child, the smell of bread in the morning. I suppose it wasn't often, but it was enough. Sometimes it was on a rainy day when the humidity was thick. And I remember the smell, not of freshly baked bread, but the smell of bread being prepared.

I remember the smell of bread when it was rising. It took time to rise. My mother would wrap several loaves with a moist towel and simply set them aside. The yeast agents would begin to do their work, and the loaf would grow. An amazing aroma wafted through the house.

The finished, baked bread smelled good, too, but it was the smell of rising bread that I enjoyed. It provided anticipation and hope. The smell was a sign that this was living bread. It was rising.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," but I do not think he meant already packaged and sliced bread. I think he meant the bread that took time. I think he meant the bread that took time to mix and punch, to rest and rise, before it was baked.

Most of us want Jesus to be pre-packaged and perfected. We want someone to deliver Jesus to us with all the work already done. We rarely want to put our own time into Jesus. We don't want to do the mixing and resting. And we, for sure, do not have the time to rest and let the bread of Jesus rise. We want to take Jesus now. We want the finished product now. We'll pay good money for it.

However, most of us are buying the wrong thing. The prophet Isaiah stopped his people cold one day when he shouted out, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, for that which does not satisfy?" Yes, we tend to spend money on things we think will satisfy us, but which do not. The right this and the perfect that. We are seduced by sensationalism, and in love with the immediate. We believe we can acquire happiness instantly, and we do not need to wait for anything.

This attitude strikes even our religious lives. We have been tricked into thinking we can achieve instant spiritual perfection. We think that Jesus and the kingdom of God are finished products for us.

But the immediate does not satisfy. Immediate gratification does not satisfy, finally. Even immediate religious satisfaction does not finally satisfy. Rather, it shortens us, stifles us, stunts our growth. We don't give time for the bread to rise, and so we don't rise either. We are stunted.

The bread of Jesus is living bread. If it is living bread, it takes time to rise.

Don't get me wrong. Jesus does want us immediately. He said, "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away." Jesus does take us as we are. Just as I am. Jesus accepts us even when we have had no time for God or religion lately, even when we seem to have forgotten what it is to grow in God. Jesus accepts us even when we are in a hurry. Thank God that he has that mercy.

But Jesus wants, more than anything else these days, our time. Jesus wants our time. Jesus wants our habits and disciplines and routines. Jesus wants us to know that grace and peace do not happen suddenly or only once. They are the fruit of steady routines. They are the bread of life that has required time to prepare and to rise.

Yes, Jesus is living bread; and so Jesus comes to us in life. Jesus comes to us as we live out routines and habits. I believe this is why God calls us to households and families, and even to churches. It is in our relationships with people that we learn the most about the bread of life. It is in our relationships with people that we learn to love, and to forgive. We learn about mercy and truth. We learn about growth and character.

Have you been separated from your household or family lately? Have you been angry? Have you been divided and upset? Sure we have. Every household, every family goes through moments of disappointment and division. Every church does. Our own church, the Episcopal Church, has just spent two weeks in General Convention, trying to pass legislation that guides and defines our common life together, and it has been exhausting. Many, on both sides of most issues, have been disappointed and divided about something.

Such is family life. Such is life in the household of God. But I believe God wants us in these relationships. God wants us in households. God wants us in churches. God wants us to hold to each other, because, finally, that is how God teaches us to grow in love, to grow in forgiveness, to grow in peace.

Listen to what the Epistle to the Ephesians teaches us today: "let us all speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4.25-32).

What a magnificent passage! This list of directions sounds like a recipe. In fact, it sounds like a recipe for bread. It is a recipe for the bread of life. "Walk in love," the passage concludes, "as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5.2).

"A fragrant offering," Ephesians says. That fragrance is the smell of fresh bread rising in the house. God puts us in households and families and churches so that we can learn to love and to imitate God.

God knows it is hard sometimes. There are some of us here who may have given up on family life, or relationship life, or who may have given up on church life. Don't give up. Our life together is meant to be the mixing bowl, with all kinds of ingredients, including the special Spirit of God, the yeast that makes the entire mixture rise.

This mixture needs you. This bread needs you. Whoever you are, even if you are here at the Cathedral for the first time, this mixture needs you. If you've been here a hundred years, this mixture needs you. Jesus said, "anyone who comes to me I will never drive away."

"And this is the will of the Father," Jesus said, "that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day....I am the living bread. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on

the last day."

Yes, Jesus will raise us up, too, each of us and all of us together. Do not fear if you've been lonely or forsaken, if members of your family have been separated or angry. Do not fear if you've been beaten down. Jesus will raise you up. Jesus will raise us up, together, like living bread.

Taste and see that this bread is good. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*