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## *I am the Bread of Life*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Proper 13 – Year B**

*Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” John 6:35*

Several years ago, I presided at a funeral in a rural cemetery.

I remember gathering at the family plot. A lectern stood off by itself facing a large, green tent. Several generations of family and friends took up positions in the shade of the tent. I assumed my place behind the lectern, feeling the heat of the sun on my back and wondering why in the world I had worn my wool vestments to an outdoor burial in the middle of July!

After the readings, a friend of the family approached the lectern to offer a remembrance. I moved off to the side, prayer book and hymnal in hand. She talked about the deceased, eloquently naming a character that everyone recognized. She talked about her sense of loss. And then, she started to sing.

“Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!”

We all recognized these words, and one by one began to sing along.

Now, this hymn has more verses that you might imagine. I knew that I wouldn’t remember them all. So, I began fumbling through my book looking for the hymn.

By the time I found it, everyone was already in full voice, following the lead of the woman behind the lectern, as if they had been practicing together for years.

“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.”

When I looked down at my book, I realized that the words we were singing were not in the same order as those in the book.

The woman behind the lectern was singing the words as they came to her, creating her own arrangement as she went along.

She had started where the book does, but then began mixing and matching the verses.

She ended the first verse with the words the book thought belonged to the second verse.

She ended the second verse with the words that the book thought belonged to the fourth verse.

And so it went.

Once I figured out what she was doing, I closed the book and followed her.

She was doing a new thing, and she was doing it conviction and feeling. It was clear to me that, at least in this moment, she

was right and the book was wrong. The words that first came out of the mouth of a slave trader, whose ship had been battered at sea, now belonged to her.

She didn't treat them with the practiced precision of a classical musician trying to perfectly present what the composer intended.

She owned them like a jazz pianist, rearranging them and allowing them to transform the hymn into a unique piece of self-expression.

I can still see that woman behind the lectern.

I can still hear her voice.

When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," he is telling us to be more like her.

Jesus has just performed a miracle. He went up on the mountain and fed five thousand people with just five barley loaves and two fish. Then, he walked across the water to the other side of the sea.

The crowd interpreted his action just as you would expect. They had heard this hymn before. They already knew all of the words.

Jesus went up on the mountain, just like Moses did.

Jesus gave them bread from heaven, just like Moses did.

Jesus led them across the water, just like Moses did.

Surely, Jesus is the one to liberate them from their oppressors, just like Moses did.

Surely, he too is a prophet who would become king!

"What sign are you going to give us then," they asked, "so that we may see it and believe you?"

They know all of the words, but they haven't yet experienced their transforming power.

Jesus is not asking that they just open up the hymnal, and sing the same song in the same way that it has always been sung before.

It's not just about satisfying physical hunger or throwing off political oppression.

It's also about living into the presence of God, and being changed by it.

In the poetic lyrics of Jesus, the bread is a metaphor for eternal life.

Now, to be clear, eternal life is not the same thing as immortal life or everlasting life. It's not about something that happens later, in some other place called heaven. It's about something that is happening here and now.

Like the woman behind the lectern, the crowd has experienced an amazing grace, and they are being asked to live a life filled with that grace.

They are being asked to rearrange the words that came out of someone else's mouth, to participate in the life of Christ, to feel the power of the Holy Spirit, and to let those words transform them into a unique piece of self-expression, an expression that more clearly reflects the image of God.

And, at least for a moment, they seemed to get it.

They closed their hymnals, and followed Jesus' lead.

"Sir," they said to him, "give us this bread always."

I read a story recently about a church in Chicago that experienced a new life nourished by just this kind of bread.

A little more than ten years ago, Broadway United Methodist Church began looking at all of its ministries and decided that it needed to change. It needed to stop helping people.

The church hired someone that it called a “roving listener.” The listener’s job was to rove around the neighborhood, looking for the good in people. He sat on their porches, and stood by their gardens. He didn’t worry about their needs, all those things they didn’t have. He focused on their gifts, what they could do and what they cared about.

He asked questions like, “What do you do well enough that you could teach others how to do it too?”

He asked questions like, “What would you like to learn?”

He asked questions like, “Who, besides God and me, is going to walk with you on your journey?”

The answers changed the way that the church understood its mission.

The church began introducing people to others who had common interests. Soon, there were cooking groups, gardening groups, and quilting circles.

The church began to match people who knew how to fix cars or work on houses with people whose cars had broken down or whose homes needed repair.

The church even began closing down some of its oldest ministries.

They closed the afternoon tutoring program because it hadn’t reduced the neighborhood dropout rate or dealt effectively with the crime that plagued the kids.

They closed the feeding pantry because the food they were serving was contributing to obesity, which had become the biggest health problem in the neighborhood.

And finally, the church became entrepreneurial, using its resources to enable people to start up groups and businesses that served the neighborhood.

One woman started a restaurant in the church kitchen.

A group started a community garden, and another group created a farmers market.

The church had taken the hymn it had been singing, re-arranged the words and allowed them to transform it into an expression of new life.

It went from standing outside of the neighborhood, looking in, to taking its place inside of the neighborhood, looking out.

It went from searching for what was bad, to searching for what was good.

It went from being a servant, to being a friend.

And, these movements gave new life to both the church and the neighborhood.

Together, they became a community that learned to take care of its own needs, often generating an abundance that they shared with others.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

It’s an old hymn that continues to offer us new life, if we just learn to sing it as our own and allow it to transform us.

I can still see that woman behind the lectern.

I can still hear her voice.

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we’d first begun.”

Amen.

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