

HOW DO WE EAT THIS BREAD?

John 6:35, 41-51

“I am the bread of life” Jesus tells his audience, *“whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* He elaborates further, *“I am the bread that came down from heaven.”* And at the end of today’s passage Jesus adds, *“the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

How is Jesus bread from heaven? Most of his audience didn’t get it. How is Jesus “bread?” And how are we to *eat* him? *Give us more of those loaves and fishes – sure we’ll be glad to eat them, but how are we supposed to eat you?* We might well join them in questioning: *Jesus, how are you nourishment for our souls? How are we to eat you so that we will never be hungry? How are you bread, and not just any bread, but bread that has come down from heaven and bread that gives eternal life? What kind of strange metaphor is this Jesus?*

Spiritual writer Eugene Peterson, who wrote the translation of the Bible called *The Message*, has written a 5-volume work on spiritual theology. The second book in that series is titled, *Eat this Book, a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Peterson says that we are to *eat* the scriptures. He doesn’t mean that we are to literally tear out the pages, put a little ketchup or relish on them and chew the paper until we can eventually swallow without gagging. But we are to chew on the words. We are to assimilate them, take them into our life, our being. The words of Scripture are meant to nourish us, to sustain us, to give us strength and energy and direction. They are *food* for our souls.

Peterson draws a picture of the way his dog chews on a bone. His dog licks the bone, chews it, growls over it and worries it. The dog will keep at it for days, burying the bone and digging it up again, then chewing on it some more until that whole bone is eventually chewed up. That’s the way Peterson suggests we chew on a passage of scripture. He speaks of the *“forbidding discipline”* required in spiritual reading.

Forbidding because it requires that we read with our entire life, not just employing the synapses in our brain. Forbidding because of the endless dodges we devise in avoiding the risk of faith in God. Forbidding because of our restless inventiveness in using whatever knowledge of “spirituality” we acquire to set ourselves up as gods. Forbidding because when we have learned to read and comprehend the words on the page, we find that we have hardly begun. Forbidding because it requires all of us, our muscles and ligaments, our eyes and ears, our obedience and adoration, our imaginations and our prayers. (Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*, Wlm. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 10)

That’s the way I suggest that Jesus can be for us *the bread from heaven*. We meet Jesus in his person in the Gospel lessons, the babe born in a stable, the young boy in the temple, the carpenter, the young man baptized by his cousin John in the wilderness, the preacher, the miracle worker, the rabbi in the temple, the broken man suffering upon the cross. But more than that we meet Jesus as the *Word of God* spoken of in the prologue of

the Gospel of John. “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” This *Word* that communicates God’s life, that shares in God’s mighty act of creation, this same *Word* became flesh – became a human being, the son of Mary and Joseph – Jesus. But Jesus as *Word of God* connects to all the sacred scripture that communicates God’s story to God’s people. We meet Jesus, the *Word*, in all the *words* of scripture.

Next Sunday I will talk about the *Eucharistic sense* of Jesus’ description of himself as *the bread of heaven*. Today I would like to explore with you how Jesus as God’s *Word* is bread for us to eat, is indeed the *bread come down from heaven that gives life to the world*. We can begin to reflect on Jesus’ meaning by *chewing on, meditating on* the meaning, implications and associations of this particular passage of scripture in John 6:35, 41-51.

This is the first of Jesus’ “*I am*” sayings, “*I am the bread of life.*” The phrase “*I am*” has powerful connotations in the scripture. The name *Yahweh*, the word God used to name himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:14), means “*I am.*” It is a form of the verb *to be*. It carries with it also a sense of the future. *I am who I am; I will be who I will be*. When Jesus says “*I am*” he is identifying himself with the living God. In the Gospel of John we see Jesus go on to identify himself with God through a series of stunning metaphors.

- *I am the light of the world* (John 8:12 and again in John 9:5)
- *I am the good shepherd* (John 10:11)
- *I am the resurrection and the life* (John 11:25)
- *I am the way, the truth and the life* (John 14:6)
- *I am the vine* (John 15:5)

And even more explicitly during the feast of booths at the temple Jesus tells them, “*very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.*” (John 8:58) As our *light*, as our *shepherd*, as our *resurrection*, our *life*, our *truth*, our *way*, the *vine* from which we take our nourishments as branches, and as the *bread of life* Jesus is absolutely connected to God the Father and thus connects us through him to God the Father.

As *bread from heaven* Jesus pointed to *Manna*. For 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the Hebrew people were sustained by *Manna*, a thin, sweet deposit on the ground gathered in the early morning with the dew on the desert floor. The Hebrew people depended on the *Manna*. They couldn’t gather extra, only what they could eat that day. It didn’t save. Gathering the *Manna* each day the Hebrew people had to rely completely on God for their sustenance. So we are to fed daily on Jesus, the *Manna* from heaven. As we eat this *bread*, this *Word of God* we are trusting God and being sustained by him.

We should be sustained daily by God’s *Word*, just as the Hebrew people were sustained daily by the *Manna*. As we read and pray and reflect on some part of the Holy Scripture each day God’s story will fill our lives and imaginations. The story of God’s people will

become more fully *our story*. We'll assimilate it. We'll be part of that ongoing story. As we pray the words, perhaps of a psalm or a favorite Gospel passage or Bible story, they connect us in a deeper way to God. As we try to follow the words and live their implications in the challenges and decisions we face each day we put the Word of God into action. In this way the *bread from heaven* becomes not only sustenance for us, but also sustenance and light and hope for a broken world.

Jesus' hearers couldn't understand how Joseph and Mary's son, the carpenter they had seen grow up in the village, could possibly make such grandiose claims. They couldn't conceive how God could empty God's-self of his infinite majesty to be revealed as a human being. But we have learned that is as a human being that Jesus could show us God. It is as a human being that he could come down from heaven to be the true nourishment that gives life to the world.

Jesus' life – his words, his teachings, his healing, his prayer, the remembrance of his Last Supper, his trial, suffering and death upon the cross; his rising to life again and his ascension into heaven to fill all time and all space – all of Jesus – is the *bread come down from heaven* which feeds and sustains us. The scriptures, which are in a larger sense *God's Word* also feed and sustains us. These are words of life; this is the *bread of life*. As we eat the words, chew on the words, wrestle with words, meditate on the words, study the words, pray the words, trust the words and live the words, we will find indeed that they are *the bread of life that gives life to the world*. So let us keep the feast! Let us eat and chew and meditate on Jesus' life and Word.

Amen.