Natalie W. Bell
March 23, 2025

The Bread of Life
John 6:26-35

[26] Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because ***you ate the loaves and had your fill****. [27] Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."*
[28] Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"
[29] Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."
[30] So they asked him, ***"What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? [31] Our ancestors ate the manna*** *in the wilderness; as it is written: '****He gave them bread from heaven to eat****.'[c]"*
[32] Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but ***it is my Father who gives you the true bread*** *from heaven. [33] For the bread of God is the* ***bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."***
*[34] "Sir," they said, "****always give us this bread."***
[35] Then Jesus declared, ***"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty****.*

This week we continue our study of the ***Gospel of John.***
If you are joining our Wednesday night study,
we are reading Chapters 6-11 of John this week,
paying special attention to the "***I AM" sayings of Jesus.***

There are 7 "I AM" sayings—
7 being the number of wholeness or completeness in the Bible.
They are: I AM the ***bread, the light, the gate,***
The good shepherd, the resurrection, the way and the vine.

The fact that Jesus says "I AM" is significant.
We cannot overstate its importance.
I AM is the same thing that ***God said to Moses*** at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14, when Moses says ***who shall I say sent me?***
God says tell them ***I AM sent you***.

What does I AM mean?
Literally it is the Greek words: ego eimi—
which means *I Am who I am*, or *I am myself.*
It conveys something like *I am the source of all existence*, or
I am the one who defines existence.

This is why the personal name of God, YAHWEH in Hebrew,
was not spoken aloud or written by the Jews after the 4th century B.C.
They started to only refer to God's name as ***'The Name'*** or *ha shem,* in Hebrew,
or by the name ***Adonai, which means Lord.***
In our Bibles, the ***LORD in small caps*** is the Hebrew word Yahweh,
And ***Lord in lowercase*** is the word Adonai.

This is why Jesus got into so much trouble with the Jewish authorities
in the Gospels—because he said that he was ***equal*** with God,
that he was, God, himself.
In John 8:56 Jesus says: *'Before Abraham was, I AM'.*
That caused the Jewish leaders to almost lose their minds.
They wanted to stone him for blasphemy!
But in the Gospel of John, Jesus says ***I AM over and over again***—
in fact he has 7 times that he says I AM, ***followed by a metaphor,***
meant to convey his true identity and mission.

I AM the Bread of Life is the first I AM statement.
And the ***context*** of his words is important.
Earlier in Chapter 6, Jesus fed a crowd of over 5000 people
with just a few loaves and fish.
That miracle is the ***ONLY miracle story found in all four Gospels***—
so it's an ***essential story*** to understanding who Jesus is
and what he came to do.

That miracle is performed at the time of the Passover—
the festival where the people remembered and re-enacted
the plague of the angel of death passing over them in Egypt before the Exodus.
It was the time when they ate unleavened bread,
Remembering their quick escape from enslavement.

It's no accident that Jesus offers the people BREAD.
Bread is an ***essential food,*** all over the world.
Bread is mentioned ***over 200 times*** in the Bible.

It is one of the only foods that is ***always broken, and often shared.***

Bread is powerful because it ***not only FEEDS*** people,
it ***brings people together into COMMUNITY***.
The Latin word for *breaking bread* is *companere*—which means ***companion***.
In other words, bread is **food**, and bread is **community**.
And we need both sustenance and community to truly live!
Without these things, we die in more ways than one.

It's no accident that Jesus fasts for 40 days in the desert before his ministry,
And is tempted by the devil to ***turn stones into bread.***
Bread is necessary.
Bread means life.

So Jesus offers something that we need to LIVE.
But so often we want Jesus—
only for what he can offer us,
only for what he can give us in terms of physical or material things,
or miracles that we are requesting.

In 19th century China, there was a term for people who came to church ONLY for the material food that the church offered them.
They came for the food, converted to Christianity in baptism, joined the church, and were active—as long as they received rice to eat.
So the missionaries started referring to them as ***'rice Christians'.***
Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, WJK: Louisville, 2009, pg. 308.

I wonder how often WE are like 'rice Christians'?
How often do we want a religion that gives us what we want,
with nothing required in return?
How often do we want our own needs met,
without thinking about what we might ***give***,
or how we might ***surrender*** or ***follow*** Christ?
How often do we think about ourselves and ***not the greater body*** of Christ?

Don't WE often want a religion of convenience?
A religion that offers us the things you know,
that we are "looking for in a church"—
None of which are bad in themselves,
But they are not designed to be the end goal.

Our goal is ideally ***a relationship with Jesus,***
The opportunity to be ***disciples***.
Following Jesus is really NOT about us.

But so often we make it about US.
We may be only happy with the music that we like in worship,
Or a great kids and youth program,
Or the right mission work,
Or the right people, you know?
And all of those things are good and important,
But they are not the goal.
They are not the prize of faith in Christ.
But how often do we USE the church for our OWN ENDS?

O. Benjamin Sparks writes in *Feasting on the Word:*
We North American Christians have preached a broken, truncated gospel.
We have been ***good marketers rather than true witnesses****.*
We have bought into a culture that ***rewards consumers and their needs****,*
instead of proclaiming a gospel that ***offers us faith in the only begotten Son****…*
He is the bread of life.
Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, WJK: Louisville, 2009, pg. 310.

Remember the manna of the Old Testament—they called it bread from heaven?
It was the food that rained down for the Israelites
While they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.
It was like little bits of bread that came with the dew on the grass each morning.
But, it was only good for the day it was collected!
Manna spoiled for anyone who tried to keep it for more than 24 hours—
unless it was the Sabbath, and then they could collect twice as much,
and it would keep until the Sabbath was over.
Manna kept them alive.

We need Bread—but we need the Bread of Life—most of all.
We need the bread that means we will not hunger or thirst,
Just as we hear in the Lord's Supper, every month.
Jesus is our true food, and the Bread that really satisfies our souls.

***Jesus is both our sustenance and our community*---**
that's what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper—

We receive our spiritual food and drink,
and come together in communion—with Jesus and one another.
The Lord's Supper creates a bond and unity in the body of Christ.
This is why we sing ***Blest Be the Tie that Binds***
at the end of every communion Sunday.

There is, however;, a PROBLEM with seeking Jesus the Bread of life.
And it is this: ***Do we truly understand Jesus***—his identity and his mission?
I find it interesting that the word for ***manna*** in the Old Testament means
"What is it?"
Because that's what they asked when they received it from God!
They didn't understand it, at all.
Or the way it was to provide for one day and one day only.
Manna required dependence upon God!

And that's true today—for us and Jesus.
We are meant to depend upon our Savior.
But Jesus can be a bit mysterious.
Especially in the Gospel of John.

I know that I don't always understand Jesus.
It's easy to look at the crowds and the disciples in the Gospels, and think—
wow, *THEY are really clueless, aren't they?*
But we have the whole story, beginning, middle and end.
We know how the story goes.
But what if WE had been there?

I don't know if I was living in that day,
if I would truly understand Jesus and what he came to do!
Could I have been like the woman at the well who is confused by the term
living water?
Could I have been like the crowds who were only focused on literal bread?
When Jesus was talking about ***himself***, the Bread of life?
Maybe we would have been like those who kept saying: *give us a sign!*
Can't we imagine ourselves saying: Sir, give us this bread always!

I think if we're honest, Jesus IS hard to understand!
Especially in this highly theological Gospel of John!

Did you see the commercials in the Super Bowl, about Jesus?
The "***He Gets Us"*** campaign?
And the commercials were showing people washing others' feet,
and serving outcasts?
They were interesting takes on who Jesus is today.

Jesus definitely GETS US—
the question is, do WE get HIM?
John 6:26 begins with Jesus saying:
"you look for me because you do NOT know who I am".

I think that's a great question for us to consider in Lent--
who is Jesus?
Do we understand his identity and his mission?
And can we see and hear him---today?
Are we even paying attention?

Last week we talked about looking for God-sightings during Lent.
Are you looking for Jesus in your everyday life?
And what does it mean for us to ***find him*** in our lives, and in our world?

Methodist Pastor and author Will Willimon suggests
that the Gospel of John is ***a 'symphony of incomprehension'***
He says that the crowd's faith was in ***THEIR IDEA of a Savior.***
This is why in John Chapter 6, the crowds want Jesus to be their King!
They really don't get him!
Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, WJK: Louisville, 2009, pg. 309.

But what about US?
Is our faith in JESUS, or in our IDEA of who Jesus should be for us?

On Wednesday night, we talked about signs and miracles,
and how sometimes we pray for a miracle--and we are healed,
and other times we pray for that same miracle--and we are NOT healed—
at least not in the way we want.

But here's the thing—we don't believe in a FORMULA.
That's not who God is.
We don't believe that if you pray the right prayers, you get the right answer.

Pray this much, or this way, and you'll be healed, or you'll have prosperity,
Or you'll get what you want.
That's a *name it and claim it theology*—that some churches preach, but we do not.

We believe in a PERSON, not a formula.
We believe in a ***relationship*** with Jesus Christ.
A Savior, not a genie in a bottle, giving us what we ask for.
We believe in a person who is, in his own words,
'the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:6).

The people in the Gospel of John often ask for 'SIGNS'.
And Jesus does offer miraculous signs.
And they still don't get Him!
When he says he is the Bread of Life, they think he's talking about physical food!
The question is, ***what do WE think?***

Isn't Jesus kind of hard to follow?
Isn't it ***challenging*** to live like Jesus?
And to understand Him?
It is for me.
I think it is for a lot of us!

So, as we go forth in Lent,
What if we decided to COMMIT to following Jesus?
Are we willing to give our lives to the food that truly satisfies?
To the food that means no more hunger or thirst?
Because by all accounts, we need the Bread of Life,
Without him, we could truly 'starve to death'!

Friends, hear the the Good News of the Gospel.
We are called to believe in Jesus Christ—the Bread of Life.
The one who offers us true spiritual food, and a new way of life.
This way of life is not about getting what we WANT,
it's about having a ***relationship with Jesus—the one we truly NEED***.
His bread is living bread.
His life is true life.
And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.