

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

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John 6:35-40

When I was growing up, my mother's favorite bread to bake was called Sally Lunn. Bread is an ancient food. The simplest recipe requires little more than water, yeast, flour, and a pinch of salt. You mix all of this together, let the dough rise, and bake. Any bread is a variation on these ingredients.

My mother's Sally Lunn recipe calls for yeast and milk (instead of water). It has flour and salt, plus sugar and eggs. You mix everything together. Let it rise. Mix it again and pour into a pan. My mother preferred loaf pans for her Sally Lunn, but people also use bundt pans or muffin tins. You let the bread rise again in the pan, and then bake. The result is a soft, sweet bread with a golden crust. My mother liked to slice the loaf with an electric knife and drizzle the slices with melted butter. She would serve the bread for breakfast with jam or serve it at dinner.

The recipe for Sally Lunn bread is centuries old. I always assumed it was from Colonial times. Sally Lunn sounded like someone who lived in house in Colonial Williamsburg, maybe between the tavern and the blacksmith. The recipe is older than that, though. It has been traced back to Bath, England. No one knows the origin of the recipe but an explanation for the name is that it is the anglicization of the French words 'soleil et lune'—sun and moon—which describe the bread's golden crust and white interior.

A more romantic accounting of the name is the legend that Sally Lunn was a French Huguenot (a Protestant) who fled France in the 1680s and settled in western England. Her name—according to this legend—was Solange Luyon—and she sold her breads on the streets of Bath. The people came to know her as Sally Lunn. Today, in Bath, you can have a meal at the Sally Lunn Eating House. The owner claims that the house was the residence of Sally Lunn and that she discovered Sally Lunn's bread recipe in an ancient document in a secret panel above the fireplace.

Sally Lunn bread has worked its way into our culture having been mentioned by Charles Dickens in his book *The Chimes*. It is also part of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Sorcerers* where you can sing these lyrics:

Now to the banquet we press; now for the eggs and the ham;
Now for the mustard and cress, and now for the strawberry jam!
Now for the tea of our host, now for the rollicking bun,
Now for the muffin and toast, now for the gay Sally Lunn!

Sally Lunn bread, and bread of all sorts, play an important part in human history. To grow grain to make flour is why humans developed agriculture. Just think of all the breads we eat today. We have sandwich bread and dinner rolls. We have French bread and Italian bread and Belgian waffles and English muffins and Texas toast. We have Wonder Bread and Bunny Bread. We have banana bread, zucchini bread, corn bread, and potato bread. We shape our bread into circles and deep fry them until they become doughnuts. On birthdays we slather round loaves with sugary frosting and set it on fire. On Saturdays we fry up bread dough and drown it with maple syrup. We make flat disks of bread and cover it with tomato sauce and pepperoni slices. We do all sorts of things with bread. Can you imagine life without it?

Given all the ways that we use bread, it is really not that surprising that we read in the Gospel of John Jesus' claim, *I am the bread of life*. Bread is basic; bread is central to our lives. It makes sense for the one who is our savior to assert *I am the bread of life*.

Seven times in John's gospel Jesus uses this formula *I Am* to define himself. Through this season of Lent I will preach on each of these *I Am* statements. On the First Sunday of Lent we looked at Jesus' saying *I am the light of the world*. Last week, it was *I am the gate*. Today, being communion Sunday, we are exploring how Jesus is bread.

What does Jesus mean by proclaiming himself *bread of life*? On one level, it is a straightforward metaphor—Jesus is the source of life for the world. Jesus sustains life just as bread gives us nourishment. It is an uncomplicated image. As Jesus says a little later, *Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life* (6:47-8).

But given that this is the Gospel of John, there is much more to it than that. The notion of bread runs deep here. It is not until chapter 6 that Jesus proclaims *I am the bread of life*. John has been laying the groundwork for this statement since chapter 1. For example, in chapter 4, Jesus says to his disciples, *I have food to eat that you do not know about*. The disciples are confused and wonder who it that slipped food to their master. Jesus, of course, is speaking metaphorically. It is in chapter 6 that we first read about bread. It is in the feeding of the 5000 when Jesus serves the crowd bread.

The *I Am* statements that we find in John are all about Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Jesus is more than a talented rabbi, he is the Son, the Word, the Lamb, and more. That is what these *I Am* statements emphasize, that Jesus is the Christ.

When Jesus proclaims, *I am the bread of life*, we can accept this statement at its simplest level. John, however, offers three deeper interpretations of this claim.

First, he tells us that, as bread, Jesus is *from heaven*. Second, as bread, Jesus does God's will. Third, as bread, Jesus creates community.

Do you remember how when the Israelites were wondering the wilderness and their food supplies were running low and God sent them the food they called manna? It was manna from heaven. Jesus tells the crowd, *I am the bread of life... I have come down from heaven*. The crowd demanded a sign from Jesus, to prove who he was. They reminded him of the manna from heaven—that had been Moses' sign. Jesus points out that it was not Moses but God who provided the manna. And God provides *the true bread*. He tells them, *The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world*. He is that bread. The crowd then says to Jesus, *Give us some of this bread*. But Jesus is not simply bread, he is the bread God sends from heaven. He is the true bread. He is *from heaven*.

Secondly, Jesus is not only the bread of life, but he does God's will. *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me*. Others had come before claiming to be the messiah but their motives always turned out to be their own. Jesus, on the other hand, adheres without deviation to God's will, not his own. Even when God's will leads him toward the cross, he continues to obey. When Jesus says, *I am*, that means, I am the one who follows God's will to the end, even if it means my death.

What is God's will? It is God's will that *all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life*. That is God's desire—our salvation.

As followers of Jesus, in this season of Lent, it is our challenge to reflect and ask ourselves if we are doing God's will or are we doing our own.

Third, Jesus, as bread of life, creates community. That crowd of 5000 that Jesus fed with bread and fish were drawn to him because of his power. As John explains, *A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick* (6:2). When all those people gather around him, Jesus poses the rhetorical question, *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?* He, of course, knows the answer and uses a few loaves and some fish and feeds the crowd until they are full.

That night, Jesus and his disciples sail back across the lake to Capernaum and the next day some from the crowd track them down. When they find Jesus, he says to them, *you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate you fill of the loaves*. They have transitioned beyond the signs; they have tasted salvation.

Today, is the first Sunday of the month, and is the day that we celebrate the holy sacrament of Communion. We recall Jesus' words at the Passover table as he held the bread saying, this is my body broken for you. When we hear "broken" we think of his impending crucifixion when his body will literally be broken. But we

can also think back to the feeding of the 5000 and his words, *I am the bread of life* and how he broke the bread and fed the hungry crowd with the pieces. Today, as we take the bread let us rejoice in this precious gift of salvation. In the communion liturgy, we recount Jesus words, "This is my body, broken for you." These words can bring to mind the crucifixion, or they can also mean that Jesus is offering himself to us, not as sacrifice but as spiritual nourishment. Jesus is the bread of life divided into pieces for each of us. We shall be filled there will be leftovers.

We are like the crowd, we came for the miracles, but stayed for the salvation. As we read in John, *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them* (6:56). Jesus creates community by bringing together believers and making them as one in him.

We are that community, eating the bread together, sharing our love for Christ, rejoicing in God's promise of salvation.

Jesus is the bread, the Christ sent from heaven, who does God's will and shapes us into community so that we may be saved.

In this season of Lent, we have much to be thankful for. Amen.