

“Bread of Life, Bread for Life”  
Based on John 6:24-35  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached August 6, 2006 at San José, Costa Rica

I’m kind of a bread addict. A few years ago, as a sort of hobby, I took up baking bread from scratch. I found that there is something therapeutic about kneading the dough and something countercultural about waiting for it to rise and something rewarding about pulling a perfect loaf out of the oven. These almost spiritual experiences are not typically part of the shopping experience when picking up a loaf of Bimbo at Hipermas, although there is the waiting part in the checkout line, especially on the weekends. When I do not have time to bake my own bread, I go for the next best thing, delicacies from one of the at least five very good local bakeries within a very short walking distance from our home in Barrio Luján, as I told the children. Each has their specialties and their regular customers. I do tend to go to the same one or two, but I have tried them all. At El Trigal, my favorite pickup is a cinnamon bread to which I have already addicted the Bergsmas and Suzanne, who unfortunately for them, live on the wrong side of town. These bakeries are, for me, one of the best things about living in Costa Rica.

If bread baking for me is something of a spiritual experience, it is in truth a more solitary and individualistic exercise, although I get great joy out of sharing my efforts with others. But, to paraphrase Jesus just a little, “One does not live on one’s own bread alone.” In addition to a unique kind of cinnamon bread, these

local bakeries offer what I cannot make alone in my own kitchen. They offer a profound and necessary sense of community which draws people out of the isolation of their private homes and into relationships with other people. To the local community, these bakeries provide, in a very real sense, the bread of life in at least two respects. First, they sell very edible bread, bread which is a staple of breakfast and teatime meals in Costa Rica, so they are sustaining the physical needs of many, especially those who may find it difficult to make their way to a supermarket. But perhaps more importantly, these little places provide a meeting space in which a different kind of bread of life is shared. You see, these little storefronts or housefronts are places where people linger and get to know their neighbors, places where you can find out who lives where in case the mail is delivered to the wrong house, places where you can find out who was broken into this morning or in front of which house a smelly dead cat was left in a bag to stink up the neighborhood. They are community gathering spaces which offer both something to eat and the something more we really need to sustain us in this world: human community.

Clearly these bakeries do not offer what Christ offers as the bread of life, namely, to use his own words, that “whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” True enough. The bakery is neither the body of Christ, nor the church. Although I enjoy my cinnamon bread, I do not worship it nor have a personal relationship with its baker; Flora would not approve! However, what the local bakery does offer, I

believe, is an experience of grace, because it offer a taste, if you will pardon the pun, but a taste of the Christian life God to which calls us to participate, and a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. Let me explain.

You have no doubt noticed as you have studied your New Testament that the Gospel of John is somewhat different than the other three. Among its many differences is that we do not find parables in John, those clever stories Jesus told using everyday situations to make analogies to the kingdom of heaven. Instead of recalling these stories, the writer of John recalls those times when Jesus drew those same comparisons but did so using other methods, including the so-called “I am” statements. Among these “I am” statements are the one we heard today, “I am the bread of life,” but there are also “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the vine,” “I am the light of the world,” and others. Along with these “I am” statements, many times Jesus uses plays on words in his conversations with people that work in the same way. Recall Jesus and his encounter with Nicodemus where he plays with the words wind and spirit, or with the Samaritan woman at the well where he banter about water from Jacob’s well and the living water he offers.

In John, these metaphorical plays on words are like the parables of the other gospels, ways to engage the imagination of those whom he encountered, ways to help them relate kingdom subject matter to daily village life. Since everyone needs things like bread and water, they make good taking points. I doubt that Jesus went around with a list of “I am” statements, just waiting to try them on people. Rather,

it would seem that when he has entered into a conversation with someone, he uses what is at hand to help them to see him for who he is. Thus, since he meets a woman at a well, he makes a link between water and grace, and with those five thousand who ended up hungry as he taught, bread and grace.

In these conversations, Jesus is trying to get people to understand the nature of the gift of grace, that it is as essential to life as bread or water, and that it is free to those who believe in its provider. This is, no doubt, difficult to understand since we are generally not accustomed to receiving anything for nothing, much less something as valuable as spending eternity in the presence of God Almighty. The concept is so difficult to understand that the very same people who experienced a profoundly graceful experience in the feeding of the five thousand return to Jesus apparently having learned nothing except that Jesus was good for a handout. They want more bread, more signs, more information, more proof, more work; they have not figured out that less is more. As one observer put it, “Instead of seeing in the bread the sign, they had seen in the sign only the bread.” And so, moving on from providing the sign to explaining it, Jesus tells them that, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Yes, you need bread to sustain life, but you also need bread to live.

And so what was it these folks missed when they saw in the sign only the bread? Let’s go back to last Sunday’s gospel reading. One of the more compelling interpretations of what happened at the so called miracle of the loaves and fishes is

that the miracle was not that Jesus magically multiplied the food, but that everybody in attendance, especially the women, shared what they had brought with them instead of hoarding it for themselves once those around them started to share. This was the multiplication. Given the human tendency to be ungenerous, this is truly the greater miracle, an act inspired by the crowds' experience listening to Jesus' teaching. And so it was not really bread which fed the people that day. The spiritual community created by this sharing was what really fed them; the bread was just an excuse to share. And in case you hadn't already made the connection, recall the local bakery! We can make and eat bread at home, but we won't find the community we also need to live.

And so, if such community is possible in Christ for a moment, or a meal, why should we not believe it is possible as a way of life, and for eternal life in him as well? This is precisely what I think Jesus wants the crowd to understand, that in him is an experience of abundance and sharing and satisfaction that does not last only for a fleeting moment, or even for the five hours between meals, as is the case with my sensations of hunger, but for all our mortal years on this earth and forever in heaven. Think for a moment about how we often ask ourselves, in the wake of an outpouring of generosity and support following a tragedy or a natural disaster, "Why do we only get to see this when there is a crisis? Why can't it last?" We ask that because we have experienced the reality that everything soon returns to the way it was before, that the intensity of the moment inspires great acts of courage

and giving, but that it cannot be sustained without a deeper source of inspiration. Such was the case when five thousand were fed, but Jesus knows that in God it is possible for us to be that compassionate and caring all the time, when we become part of Christ's body by coming to him and believing in him. The people who were fed experienced profound community but fleetingly and Jesus invites them to experience that eternally. The idea that they, and we, need to take hold of, is that the kind of community created by the feeding is based in a different kind of bread. In our collective believing, we find the same life giving community experienced at the feeding. And if we are faithful, what we'll find in the midst of that community is that instead of just being spiritually fed and getting spiritually hungry again later, we'll be equipped to feed each other, sustaining the community we so desperately need.

Perhaps you are familiar with the story of a certain holy man's visit to heaven and hell. It seems that upon arriving at the pearly gates, he said to St. Peter, "You know, before I go in, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like." "Well," said Peter, "seeing as how you are holy, I think I can show you before you get assigned." So Peter led the holy man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water. The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long

handles that were strapped to their arms and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. And Peter said, "You have now seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand." "It is simple" said Peter. "Living in Heaven requires only one skill. You see, those in the Kingdom of Heaven have learned to feed each other while the greedy think only of themselves."

We can't know for sure, obviously, but I suspect that this is one reason why Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, because we need reminding every so often about that day on the hill, and the possibility of an even greater community, a community made possible by living as Christ showed us how to live, as friends laying down our lives for one another, as servants washing one another's feet. At its best, the Lord's Supper is an act of remembrance that revives our hope that we can overcome our selfishness and be a part of something larger than ourselves. May our breaking bread together this night be a powerful reminder of the life God has offered us in Jesus Christ, the bread of life. Amen.