

1. I Am the Bread of Life

John 6.25-35

Pastor Joseph E. Miller
Mason United Methodist Church

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We celebrate the Holy Communion in Christian churches today because it was instituted by Jesus, according to the scriptures, on the night that he met with his disciples for the Passover meal for the last time before his crucifixion.

The bread and the cup carry special significance in that event. They represent many facets in the history of God's people.

The scenario in John's gospel which was read in our hearing today followed an event where thousands of people were gathered to see and hear from this man, Jesus, who had gained so much attention. They had seen the healings Jesus had accomplished and wanted to see more as well as hear what he had to say. Interestingly, the Passover feast was near as the people gathered on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. That feast for the Jews was a remembrance of the exodus from Egyptian captivity and bondage into a life of freedom.

When the Israelites were making a hasty exit from Egypt they had no time to make bread in the usual way: with yeast and waiting for it to rise. So the bread they carried was unleavened and carried on their backs for their next meals. The bread used in today's observances of the Passover, and many communion observances, is unleavened.

That day beside the Sea of Galilee Jesus saw the crowds and said to one of his disciples, "Where shall we buy bread so that these people may eat?" It was then Jesus took what could be gathered, five barley loaves and two small fish from a young boy, gave thanks for what was available and then fed the entire crowd. After everyone had eaten there were twelve baskets of leftovers gathered after that particular *Taste of Galilee* celebration.

Following that event Jesus' disciples would experience something else that was quite unusual. Jesus had gone into the surrounding mountains to have some time alone. The disciples got into a boat and began to cross the Sea of Galilee toward Capernaum. That lake is about 12 miles long and about 6 miles wide. While they were rowing about 4 miles off shore a storm arose that threatened to capsize their boat. In the middle of that storm they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water, and he said, "It is I; do not be afraid." When Jesus got into the boat not only did the storm cease, but they were immediately on the shore of where they were heading. (6.20-21)

The crowds had already gathered on the other side of the lake to see and hear more; and they noticed that there was only one boat present. Having seen the disciples leave without Jesus, and now Jesus was present, they were both puzzled and amazed, asking him, "How did you get here?"

It was then Jesus spoke to the crowds and said, “You are looking for me not because of the signs and wonders you have seen, but because you ate the bread and were filled. Don’t look for the bread which spoils, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (6.27)

By now the people were quite puzzled at what they had seen and then heard Jesus say. They made reference to the manna which Moses had provided in the wilderness to nourish them during their escape from Egypt. The words they would hear next would amaze them even more. Jesus said, “Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (6.32-33)

Naturally the group opinion was quickly expressed, “Lord, give us this bread always!” (Verse 34) The crux of Jesus’ teaching would come in the next words he spoke as recorded in John’s gospel: “I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me shall never be hungry, and he who believes in me shall never be thirsty.” (Verse 35)

There are several times in the scriptures where Jesus makes statements about himself, using the words *I am*.

- I am the bread of life. (John 6)
- I am the light of the world. (John 8)
- I am the good shepherd. (John 10)
- I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11)
- I am the way, the truth and the life. (John 14)
- I am the true vine. (John 15)
- I am the son of God. (John 10)

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew name for God, Jehovah (Yahweh), is translated *I Am*. It is a Hebrew verb which is written the same way in *past*, *present* and *future* tense that can be read as, “*I was*, *I am*, and *I shall be*.” What an appropriate name for God: *I am*, *Yahweh*, *Jehovah*.

It is on these passages of scripture where Jesus declares who he is, *I am*, that I plan to speak in this and the next six Sunday sermons I deliver.

On that night when he had his last meal with his disciples, he took the bread from the table and gave it a new meaning when he said, “This bread is my body given for you. From now on when you eat bread, remember me.”

What must the disciples have thought when they heard those words? What do we think about when we hear them today?

Dr. Donald Demaray, my esteemed professor of preaching at Asbury Seminary and a prolific writer, puts these words in his book Mile Markers (Nappanee, Indiana: Evangel Publishing House, © 2007),

Let me encourage you to think deeply about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Did you notice, in the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, that after He broke the bread He gave *thanks*? Interestingly, the word for *thanks* in the Greek text relates to one of our terms for Holy Communion, *Eucharist*. In fact, *Eucharist* means *thanks*.

The Eucharist signifies many things for which to give thanks. These include the atonement (Jesus died for me!), life and nourishment from the bread and wine, the communion of believers, and the Lord's return (1 Corinthians 11.26). But especially we must express thanks for His presence in the Supper.

It is here, my friends, you will find an open door to intimacy with Christ – as you understand the Presence in the Eucharist.

To help you ponder how Christians have perceived the Presence, think through various theories.

- John Calvin: found the *mystical* Presence of Christ in the Supper;
- Zwingli (Swiss reformer): put emphasis on the *memory* of Christ's death;
- Roman Catholics: *transubstantiation*, that when the priest consecrates them the bread and wine become the *actual* body and blood of our Lord;
- Martin Luther: believed in what he called *consubstantiation* – Jesus' presence is *with, under and around* the bread and wine.

You must come to your own conclusions about the Lord's Supper, but let us agree on this much: to take the supper seriously, openly, repetitively, welcoming Jesus into our hearts freshly. After all, what is more intimate than taking in His presence? [Pages 31-32]

As we gather this morning to celebrate the Holy Communion, in remembrance of the gifts and sacrifice of Jesus as our Savior, may we also be aware of the symbolism of the bread as our role in the church: *many grains, one loaf, in the Body of Christ, the Church*.

Amen.