

I AM...THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6: 35, 41-42, 48-51

August 16, 2009

A few years ago a friend came to visit me in Tucson when I was still serving the church there. We went to lunch at a local resort which had a lovely outside patio with a view of the mountains. While we were sitting there catching up on the news of our lives, I stopped my friend in mid-sentence and whispered, "Ben, don't turn around right this minute, but when you get a chance, glance over at the table behind you. I think it's Brad Pitt."

Ben very casually found a way to look at the diners at the table behind him, and when he had turned back around he said, "It really looks like him, alright." We went back to our conversation, but of course, having Brad Pitt at the table right next to me was very distracting.

However, when he stood up to leave, I interrupted Ben again. "Nah, that wasn't Brad Pitt after all. He's too short." I was disappointed. What a good story it would have been to tell everyone that I had been eating lunch at the table next to one of the world's hunkiest stars.

I had practically forgotten the whole incident until the next day when I was glancing through the society news section of the local paper and read that Brad Pitt was in town making a movie. So it really had been he.

I told my friends later—"It's so weird that in real life, Brad Pitt doesn't look like Brad Pitt!"

That's a similar reaction we find in this morning's scripture when Jesus begins to reveal who he really and truly was to the crowd. Jesus of Nazareth—the Messiah? "Naw, that can't be—he doesn't look the Messiah."

But what does a Messiah look like? What does a Messiah do? That's the question John addresses as we consider the first of his reflections on the 7 "I Am's" of Jesus found in his Gospel. I Am the Bread of Life, Jesus says of himself.

The seed that produces the grain of this image begins in verse 1 of Chapter 6, so I invite you to turn in your Bibles to page _____.

A quick glance will tell you that we find ourselves in the midst of a familiar text, retelling the events of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. All four gospels report the event when a huge crowd had gathered to hear Jesus preach. Jesus was concerned that they all have something to eat, and commanded the disciples to take the 5 small loaves of barley bread and two fish possessed by a small boy and, after Jesus had given thanks, they began to distribute the food to the crowd that had gathered. By the time dinner was over and they had collected the left-overs, there was enough to fill 12 baskets of bread. It was a miracle!

We're invited to eavesdrop on the crowd's reaction to the event in verse 14 when we hear them say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." They were referring to a passage from the Torah—found in Deuteronomy, where Moses predicted that sometime in the future, the Lord would raise up someone like him to lead the nations.

Jesus must have been fairly impressive—he was able to draw crowds like a rock star. He seemed to exude power and confidence—and his fame spread with each healing, each conversation he had with those whom he encountered. But just because he looked like the ideal earthly king didn't mean that was what he was. Verse 15 tells us that "Jesus, knowing that they intended to make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

We next move quickly over verses 16-24, another familiar story of Jesus walking on water, calming his disciples as their boat was being violently tossed about by heavy winds. No one but the twelve witnessed this amazing feat; still, the crowds knew something was up when they went back the next morning after the storm to the place where the miracle of the feeding of 5000 had occurred and realized that Jesus and the disciples were nowhere to be found. They began to search for Jesus—and they found him later on the other side of the lake! That's where this morning's scriptural action begins.

"Rabbi, when did you get here?" they asked him when they had caught up with him.

It was time for Jesus to set the record straight—to begin to show the world who he really was and what he was doing here on earth. He begins by confronting them—"You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions, but because I fed you, filled your stomachs. You got a free lunch, and you're looking for another one! Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last."

The people were still confused. They still saw Moses when they looked at Jesus. One of Moses' mightiest miracles had come while he led the wandering Israelites through the desert. They had run out of food, and Moses called upon the Lord for help.

Could Jesus bring manna from the sky and feed the people on a daily basis so they would never have to go hungry or worry about having enough bread to eat? Could he have meant he could offer them bread for the rest of their lives?

"No," Jesus said, "not that kind of bread. I am the bread of life. All who come to me will never go hungry, and all who believe in me will never go thirsty."

"What?" the crowd began to grumble. "That sounds like he's talking about the Messiah. Is he saying he's the Messiah? Naw, that can't be. He may look like a King, but he certainly doesn't look like the Messiah— isn't he Jesus? Don't we know his mother and father?"

Jesus said. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

More murmurs from the crowd, "Did he just say he's going to let us eat his flesh? Is he a cannibal or something? Is he crazy?"

Jesus continued his revelation—his words shocking even his disciples, so much so that in verse 66 we hear that many of them turned away from following him.

Still he persisted: If you want to know who I am, you must understand that I am the Bread of Life.

Jesus' first words of self-revelation should still be shocking to us. That God came in the flesh to walk among us, to teach us, to bring healing to the nations should shock us greatly. That God gave his flesh and blood for us—should cause our hearts to beat wildly and our ears to listen closely.

And yet, I wonder if we don't make the same mistake that the folks in the crowd that day did—not recognizing Jesus, the Bread of Life. For if we really did understand and partake of what he offers us, we might never feel empty.

Jesus was not talking just about physical emptiness. Jesus wasn't offering fast food or free lunches that would fill the tummy. Instead, he was offering himself—God with us and in us—to satisfy all of life's hungers.

First, he offered spiritual sustenance. "My Spirit gives life" he said in verse 64. My food fills those hungers which eat away at your soul, that devour you, and eat you up inside.

But those who partake of what I have to offer will never be hungry for more. In fact, you'll be so full that you'll have enough to feed others. And the world will look different. If we fed upon the Bread of Life, there would never be a starving Ethiopian child or Nicaraguan refugee looking at us from the pages of National Geographic, because we would understand that it is God's will to share of the abundance of the divine bread basket of creation.

The reason I feel we have a lot in common with the crowds who were shocked by Jesus in this scripture is that we're still such a ravenously hungry people. In one of her books, Mother Teresa writes: "The spiritual poverty of the Western world is much greater than the physical poverty of [Third World] people. You in the West have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness. They feel unwanted and unloved ... These people are not hungry in a

physical sense but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don't know what it is. What they are missing really is a living relationship with God." (Life in the Spirit, Harper and Row Publishers, pp. 13-14).

Jesus said, I Am the Bread of Life. Chew on that for yourself a little bit. How does that taste? What does that taste like?

The three years I've been your pastor at East Dallas Christian Church, I have had the opportunity to celebrate three graduate Sundays. As most of you know, the special worship services are always followed by a luncheon honoring those who have reached one of life's greatest milestones, and it is our practice to ask our seniors what their favorite meal is.

The menus always differ in their choices of entrees and vegetables and even desserts. But what is always requested by our young adults is that they want Peggy's rolls. There's just something special about Peggy's rolls. When they come home from college and are here for a fellowship dinner, if we don't have Peggy's rolls, there are cries of disappointment.

There's just something about that bread that makes them feel like they've really come home.

That's what the bread of life tastes like. That's what the bread of life offers—the feeling of coming home, the experience of being wanted, loved, cared for. The feeling of being full—full of hope, strength, well-being, peace.

Jesus offered himself as that bread, so that we might have life, life abundant, life everlasting. Taste it, savor it, and know that it is yours—yours to take, and yours to share.

Because it is in the sharing that the true flavor comes through. I wonder,

- If we ever really partook, then offered Jesus as the Bread of Life, would there ever be a need for Betty Ford clinic?
- If we truly partook, then offered Jesus as the Bread of Life, would there be a reason for The Bridge homeless shelter to exist?

- If we truly partook, then offered Jesus as the Bread of Life, would we be bitterly fighting about who gets health care and who doesn't? Everyone would have access to the healing power of the Messiah's hand.

Alas, as a culture, we still don't recognize who or what the Bread of Life is for us. But the Lord keeps offering himself to us in the hope that when we truly eat, we will be filled with understanding.

That's why we take communion every week—to help remind those of us who recognize Jesus. He is the Bread of Life, offered for us, and who commanded us to share Him with the world. It is the Bread that will feed the hungers with which we know others struggle.

At the foot of a great mountain in China lived a father and his three sons. They were a simple and loving family. The father noticed that travelers came from afar eager to climb the dangerous mountain. But not one of them ever returned! The three sons heard stories about the mountain, how it was made all of gold and silver at the top. Despite their father's warnings, they could not resist venturing up the mountain.

Along the way, under a tree, sat a beggar, but the sons did not speak to him or give him anything to eat. They ignored him. One by one, the sons disappeared up the mountain, the first to a house of rich food, the second to a house of fine wine, the third to a house of gambling. Each became a slave to his desire and forgot his home. Meanwhile, their father became heartsick. He missed them terribly. "Danger aside," he said, "I must find my sons."

Once he scaled the mountain, the father found that indeed the rocks were gold, the streams silver. But he hardly noticed. He only wanted to reach his sons, to help them remember the life of love they once knew. On the way down, having failed to find them, the father noticed the beggar under the tree and asked for his advice.

"The mountain will give your sons back," said the beggar, "only if you bring something from home to cause them to remember the love of their family."

The father raced home, brought back a bowl full of rice, and gave the beggar some as a thank-you for his wisdom. He then found his sons, one at a time, and carefully placed a grain of rice on the tongue of each of them. At that moment, the sons recognized their foolhardiness. Their real life was now apparent to them.

Today we gather in this church to receive a reminder of home, a taste of food that will help us remember who we are. The bread of life, our Father's gift to us. This is the food of God's kingdom, and reminds us that his kingdom is our true home.