

"THE BREAD OF LIFE"

August 4, 1991

TEXT: John 6:35 "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst."

First, let me say that it is really good to be back here in the pulpit after my vacation. Like most of you, I was glad to get away. We all need a break now and then. I know I did. And I certainly enjoyed my time away. But I have to admit that, toward the end, I could feel myself growing more and more eager to get back here with you to do what I feel I am called to do.

And one of the things I feel called to do this morning is to turn our thoughts to the words of this morning's scripture. Like so much of the Bible, that passage is not just a story of something that happened long ago and far away. It is the story of everyone in every time and in every place. For it deals with a very human tendency --to settle for far less than God is eager to give, and to cheat ourselves in the process.

The story, itself, takes place the day after that miraculous feeding of the five thousand. The crowd, hungry once more, awakens to find that Jesus and his disciples have sailed back across the sea to Capernaum. And eager for more food --and more miracles-- they get into some nearby boats and follow him. When they finally find him, they ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

But Jesus, knowing why they really came, tries to turn their appetite for bread into hunger for something more important and less perishable. He says to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." And he warns them, "Do not labor for food which perishes, but for food which endures to eternal life"

The crowd, however, was not to be deterred. "What sign do you perform?" they ask. "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" But Jesus says to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst."

How often you and I have heard that phrase, "The bread of life." On communion Sundays we often sing those words we sang just a few minutes ago: "Break, Thou, the bread of life, Dear Lord, to me, as Thou didst break the loaves Beside the sea; beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord; My spirit pants for

Thee, O Living Word." They sound so lovely, so very pious. But what do they mean? And, more specifically, what meaning do they have for us today in the late twentieth century?

The answers to those questions become a good deal clearer when we consider the place of bread in ancient times. In those days, it was truly the "staff of life." People back then were not the meat-eaters most of us are. They could not afford to be. Their flocks were far too useful as a source of wool and milk. And only on special occasions did they actually slaughter a sheep or a goat. Most of the time they lived on bread and cheese. And sometimes only on bread.

So when Jesus said that he was "the bread of life", he meant that he was life's real nourishment, its true sustenance. He said, ". . . The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." (John 6:33) And it is pretty obvious what kind of life he is talking about. Not just the life of the body, but the life of the spirit as well.

As a matter of fact, this whole story is almost an instant replay of the conversation Jesus had two chapters before with the Samaritan woman at the well. After asking her to draw some water for him to drink, Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14) But, like the crowd in today's story, she completely misunderstood. And she said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." (John 4:15)

He was offering her spiritual life, but she was so tied up in the things of this world that she never realized it. All she wanted was for him to free her from the drudgery of coming to the well each day to draw water for her family. In today's scripture, the crowd makes the same mistake. Jesus offers them "the bread of life", but all they want is something to put in their stomachs.

Yet how different are we today. What is it that most of us want out of life. What is it that we work for, pray for, spend our money on? Is it that which feeds the spirit? You know the answer to that as well as I do. We will pay almost any price, go to any effort, for the things of this world: convenience, entertainment, security. But most of us give only lip service to the things that lead to eternal life.

Perhaps it is because we misunderstand what Jesus meant when he said, ". . . He who believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35) Or when he said, ". . . Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:26) Perhaps we think it is enough just to believe in God, to believe in Christ. But let me ask you this, "Is it enough to believe in your doctor?" Let us assume that you are sick, and you go to the doctor, and he gives

you a prescription for a certain medicine. Is it enough just to say to yourself, I believe in my doctor." Is it enough to say, "I believe that he exists; I believe that he is a good doctor; I believe he knew what he was doing when he gave me that prescription"? Of course not! That is not what believing in your doctor means. Believing in your doctor means believing enough that you go to the drug store, have the prescription filled, and take it as prescribed.

Well, believing in Christ means exactly the same thing. Not just believing he exists or that he really is the Son of God, but believing in him enough to follow his prescription. And what was that? In Matthew 6, verses 31-33, he said, "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first . . . [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

He not only said it; he lived it as well. We know, for instance, that he engaged in corporate worship on a regular basis. In Luke 4:16 we read, "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day."

We know, too, that he was regular in private prayer. In Mark 1:35 we read, "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed." And always, at the crucial points in his life, we see him engaged in prayer: after his baptism, before choosing his disciples, after he fed the five thousand, and the night before his crucifixion to cite just a few examples. And we know that he always sought to do God's will and not his own. One day his disciples brought him food to eat, but he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. (John 4:32-34)

In every way Jesus taught us to let God give Himself to us, to relate to Him in public and private worship, to serve Him in everything we do, to make God the number one priority in our lives. ". . . Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." But so often, like that woman at the well and the crowd in this morning's scripture, we seek only the things we can eat, and drink, and wear. Is it any wonder that so many of us live what David Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation."

But it is not too late. If we believe in him, if we believe enough to follow his prescription, we can still know the kind of life for which God created us. "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)