

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Jesus in His Own Words: I AM the Bread of Life
John 6

Today is World Communion Sunday. A couple of times already this weekend I have gushed to Heather [Heather Hood, Minister of Worship & Music] about the display on the communion table. Breads from all around the world. Whether baguettes or challah, all the nations of the earth love bread. I notice that missing from the display are chocolate chip cookies, but that will be taken care of, I hope, before the 11:00 service. But it's a reminder to us of the essentials of bread and water.

I had the privilege this last week of being at the World Vision board meeting in Seattle. We heard a report from a man who referenced Jeffrey Sachs. Some of you remember, Sachs is the Harvard professor who wrote a best-selling book about world poverty. Sachs says that we have a unique phenomenon happening. For the first time in history, we have as many people dying of starvation as dying of obesity. He says that we've always had those who have malnutrition and are starving for food but in this crazy system of ours now, we have about as many people who are stuffed with food and are having problems as they come to know how they should eat and how they should live. They hunger whether they have too much food or not enough, and it started me thinking that there is a hunger all through our lives. There is a hunger in our stomach and a hunger in our hearts, a hunger that reveals something missing. For some that hunger is not easy to identify. It is like a faint strain of music that you hear and you can't quite tell what it is but you know there is something missing. Thomas Kelley wrote a book about it. He says that in spite of our wealth,

We are unhappy, uneasy, strained, oppressed, and over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. We have hints that there is a way of life that is vastly richer and deeper.

Kelley says,

I longed for that way of life. Today I describe it as spiritual hunger and thirst. Spiritual hunger and thirst is simply our human need for a relationship with God.

Not for religion, God knows, but for God. I have come to believe that God is the one who puts that hunger in us to call us into relationship, and God's love lies at the root of our hunger for more. God's Son says, "I am the Bread of Life, and I will sustain you. I will provide for your needs, and I will strengthen you on your journey through this life and into eternity. Come. Let's eat together."

I don't think this happens to me often but this sermon has been really affected by yesterday's worship in this room. In the afternoon there was an ordination, somebody who has worked long

and hard to be set aside as a minister. We celebrated that. In the evening, we had our Saturday night service. But in the morning we had the funeral of a 42-year old woman, who is a friend, whose husband is in one of my studies, so I knew Emma, 42, mom of three, 9, and 6, and 4. She died of ALS. Terrible, terrible disease. And this has hung onto me as I've been preparing to talk about the Bread of Life, I thought that Emma was somebody who ate the Bread of Life. She had a strong faith, no saint but she was a strong, committed believer and loving mom. She ate the Bread of Life, and she's dead. How does that tie in? I'll get back to that.

We are talking this month about who Jesus said He was. Seven different times in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am...." The very first of those is when Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life." He says that in John, chapter 6. It is fascinating because He says this right at the peak of His popularity. Just before this, He has fed the 5,000. They come and are hungry. He feeds them all, and there are bushel loads of food left over. They want to make Him the King and He knows that even if He doesn't want it, they will force Him to be the King. So He sends the disciples across the lake in a boat and goes off to pray. At night He walks across the water, another miracle for the disciples, freaking them out and they go to the other side of the lake to escape the crowds. But the crowds wake up and say, "Where is He?" and they chase Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. That is where Jesus lays His cards on the table. He literally lays His cards on the table. John 6 says it like this.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

²⁶ Jesus answered, "**Very truly I tell you....**

"I am telling you the truth." That same phrase "I'm telling you the truth" is used five different times here.

...you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. It's on the Son of Man that God the Father has set His seal.

²⁸ Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

³⁰ So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"

³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

³² Jesus said to them, "**Very truly I tell you....**

this is the second time,

...it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

Give it to us all the time. They are imitating the Samaritan woman. Remember John, chapter 4? Jesus says, “If you knew who sits in front of you, you would ask Him for living water, and you would never thirst again.” The woman says, “Oh, that’s great. Give me that kind of water. I’ll never have to bring this heavy bucket again.” Now the crowd is saying, “Give us that bread. We are tired of having to bake every day.”

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.³⁶ **But as I told you....**

the third time,

...everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

verse 41,

⁴¹ At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?”

“Who does He think He is, God?” they asked each other.

⁴³ “Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. ⁴⁴ “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day....

⁴⁶ No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ **Very truly I tell you....**

the fourth time,

...whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which people may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

He has left the reservation.

Verse 52,

⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

⁵³ Jesus said to them, “**Very truly I tell you....**

the fifth time,

...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

By the way, this is the part of the story where many of the people who come to check out Christianity reject it. This is the part of the story where they got the idea that Christians, Christ’s followers, when they gathered around the table were cannibals, literally cannibals, eating the flesh of their leader. On hearing this, many of Jesus’ disciples said, “This is hard. Who can accept that?”

Verse 66,

⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Five thousand plus were there, it says in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and Luke, 5,000 were there. He says this and turns around, and they are all gone. They have all left except for a little core.

⁶⁷ “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

It’s a long story but it’s packed. How did things change so quickly? Jesus offers the woman at the well living water, and all the Samaritans, these half-pagan, half-Jew people, hear about that and come running. Two days later people are saying, “We believe,” but here Jesus goes home to the Jews who have been looking for a Messiah, and they all walk away. How does that happen? It says, “The crowds came, and then they grumbled.” If you were an Old Testament scholar, you would realize that He is repeating the story of the Exodus. Remember God saves His slaves, Israelites, out of Egypt, and they go out into the wilderness. Right from the start, they whine. They complain about this. They grumble about that. They all want to go back to the hotels in Egypt. “Oh, wait, we were slaves in Egypt,” but they still want to go back. “I’m hungry.” They don’t like the food. “I’m thirsty.” They don’t like the water. “Are we almost there yet?” And here it is the same thing.

The response of the crowd tells us a lot about the difference between what people want and what people need. So often the very thing that people need the most is the last thing they are looking for, and that is why we, not they, that is why we sit in the crowd and grumble. I’d like to say to you as Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life for you.” Are you stuffed or are you starving? “I’m dying for that.” How do you react when Jesus says, “Eat My Body. Drink My Blood”? Do you grumble or come forward? They grumbled, Jesus said, because they wanted the wrong thing. These folks couldn’t stomach Jesus shifting from physical food to spiritual talk, from bread for the day to bread forever. They were materialists. They wanted Jesus for what they could get out of Him.

When the missionaries went to Japan and China, they were wildly unsuccessful. Few people wanted to pick up the cross and follow Jesus until they noticed how many poor people there were. The Jesuits and the Dominicans started to feed the poor who flocked by the thousands.

They loved Jesus, went to church, and became Christians. By hundreds of thousands, they proclaimed themselves Christians. But then the Franciscans came, the brothers of poverty, and they said, "They're coming for the rice not for Jesus. Here's the acid test. Take away the rice and see if they keep coming to Jesus." The problem with "rice Christians" is that when the goodies are gone, so are they.

I'm not sure the American church is all that different. Too many people use church for business contacts, community status, to get God on their side. "Rice Christians" are all over the world. We look to God for what we can get and the first time God fails to deliver, something went wrong with God. Jesus told the crowd. "Don't work for food that spoils but for eternal food."

Emma's death reminded me that the Bread of Life that Jesus offers cannot mean it will all be good and better all the time. She ate the Bread of Life, and she died terribly. Jesus sees these people who say, "I want more food." I've got to tell you, her death reminds me that the life that Jesus offers goes through the cross and not through Disney World. We want the Jesus that brings us to Disney World. Last night it was so funny, there was a kid sitting right there, and he goes, "But I like Disney World." So do I. Disney World is great, but Jesus is not promising Disney World.

Some of that crowd seemed to recognize that Jesus was talking spiritually. They were used to that, and they wanted to know, how do we get in? They asked Jesus, what must we do to do the works that God requires? For the Jews, for all the Jews, Moses rescued them, then he went up to the top of the mountain and came down with the Commandments that said, "If you do these things, you will live. If you don't, you will die." They are used to the Commandments being the minimum entrance requirements to get into heaven, and Christians are exactly the same. "Tell us what rules there are, tell us what the threshold is, and we'll get one answer above that." The Jewish people were very sincere. They weren't manipulative. They were tenacious. But Jesus is saying, "The Bread of Life is not about trying harder, working more, getting the score right." As a matter of fact, when Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount, the central part of the Sermon on the Mount is, "You cannot follow the Law well enough to get into heaven." There has got to be another door. Jesus says, "The door is Me, the Bread of Life."

Wherever the Bread of Life is baked, it is not among the scorekeepers. Presbyterians are great scorekeepers. We are proud of what we do in the Name of God, and that's good, but it always ticks religious people off when they are told that trying so hard will not necessarily be rewarded in this world or the next. So Jesus says to the materialists, "No more 'rice Christians.'" And He says to the legalists, "It's not about obeying the laws." Then He turns to the folks who asked, "What sign are You going to give us? What sign are You going to give us next"—that's the key word—"what sign are You going to give us next so that we will believe you?" These are the sensationalists.

Our student ministries staff at The Table allowed me to go with them to a conference this week down in Atlanta. Thirteen thousand people, all of them decades younger than I am, crammed into this arena, and it was fabulous. The speakers were world class. The music and worship

went on for hours. It was filled with sights and sounds of creativity. It was powerful, and as you walked out, you go, "Holy cow! Now we've got to go back to church." That's what's happening here. "What sign are You going to give us? What are You going to do next?" because unless God does something to top *that*, there is something wrong. What's next?

Some of you are spiritually stuffed because you haven't done anything with what God gave you last time, and you are already looking for what the next meal is. And some of you don't think that you are really a follower of Christ because you haven't felt that feeling. You haven't felt close to God. You haven't felt loved by God. You are sure that your faith is sick because God doesn't feel close. You are asking, "What sign are You going to give me that I am close?" Jesus says, "This is the sign. You are going to eat My Body, you are going to drink My Blood, and you are going to live forever." He gives an alternative to being a materialist who gets more, or a legalist who obeys more, or a sensualist who says, "What's next?" Jesus says, "Are you still hungry?" How do you develop a taste for the Bread of Life? "Blessed are those," Jesus said, "who hunger and thirst after righteousness," the right things. How do we eat His flesh, drink His blood, live forever starting today?

I think it starts with where He started, "Eat My Body. Drink My Blood." I think the people who eat the Bread of Life come together. We worship together. Yesterday the ordination service was worship, and our gathering at 5:15 in the evening was worship. We ate and we drank the Blood of Jesus together, but maybe the strongest worship was in the funeral where we talked about Emma's life and how much we miss her. As we walked out together in the hope that Christ offers eternal life, people were hugging each other and crying together and being comforted by hope that will not die. You cannot eat the Bread of Life alone. We are called to do it together. Jesus said, "If you come to Me, eat My Body." He is called The Word.

Jesus said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That means we need to feed on God's Word. The problem for me is that you feel like, "Oh, you know, I come to church." Do you eat once a week? How would you do if you crammed as much food into your body as you could in one hour once a week, and then tried to live a normal life? It doesn't work. We need to eat on a regular basis. We are trying here to do that together.

Over 1,100 of you are in small groups where you feed on God's Word, so that's at least a second meal. As you can imagine, I have to read the Bible quite a bit, but that's just study. Four, 5, 6 times a week, I go some place, get by myself, and I open the Bible and I say, "God, speak to me and teach me how to speak to You." Sometimes I don't hear anything, and other times God says this, that, or read on. God speaks to me and God wants to speak to you so that you can speak to God. We worship together. We feed on His Word, and then Jesus asked very poignantly, "Are you going to leave Me, too?" If you want to eat the Bread of Life, then you can't leave Jesus. You have to be like Peter and say, "We're staying with You. We need to remain with the Savior."

The problem with remaining with the Savior is Jesus refuses to stay in church. Jesus leaves church and goes home, to your home, and He leaves home and He goes to work or to school or wherever you go in the community, and you have to follow Jesus to remain with Jesus. Are you doing that or does Jesus stay here so you leave Jesus at church?

In the next weeks we are going to talk about the guidance of the Shepherd and abiding in Him,

and that is the message that I think Jesus was conveying there. “Are you leaving Me, too?” “We will remain with You.” I love the words of that old hymn, “*Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.*” That’s me. I love Jesus in church. Do I love Him when I’m yelling at somebody in the parking lot? Where is Jesus when I am trying to do my taxes? Peter says, “Are we going to leave? Where else could we go? Only You have the words of eternal life. Life that has begun for us now,” Peter says, “goes on forever.” Are you hungry or are you stuffed? Can you develop a taste for the Bread of Life?

Lord Jesus, this is a hard one. No wonder the kids get confused. For us to believe that the Bread of Life is Your Body and Your Blood is hard. For us to see that when we eat this Bread, even if our bodies die, we live forever, is harder still. But for us to live the old way after we have heard of Your love, that leaves us hungry. This morning we ask that You will feed us, not the food of people, but the Bread of Life that comes from heaven and will strengthen us to follow You all the days of our lives. Bless us. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.