

Text: John 6:1-21

Bread of Life Series #1

I want to begin with a refresher course about the lectionary cycle. It is a three year cycle, and each year our gospel reading comes from one of the first three gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. This year, most of our gospel readings have been from Mark's gospel. But, every year we also read some from the Gospel According to John. Usually those readings are at key points in the liturgical year. But this year, the year of Mark, we get this whole 5 Sunday run of readings from John. The readings that explore the sign of Jesus as the Bread of Life. Today is the first of the series, all of which comes from the sixth chapter of John.

A little background on the Gospel according to John. It is most likely the last of the gospels written. It was mostly likely written by the disciple John, or his students. This is John, one of the 'son's of thunder,' brother of James, and sometimes called 'the beloved disciple.' When he wrote the gospel, John would probably have been the last surviving disciple; his brother being James the first to die as a martyr, many years before.

John had a lot of time to think about all of what he saw, and experienced, to reflect on its meaning, to think about how he would communicate the story to his own students. John's gospel is unique for its poetic symbolism and its structure. The gospel itself is made up of 3 basic parts.

Prologue: sets the Jesus story in the context of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, or light and dark. Because the darkness hates the light, it is constantly struggling against it, even though it never wins.

Book of Signs include 7 miracles, which are understood to point our attention to the light and to the miracles, but more than miracles just themselves. Miracles that define the light, show features of the light. 7 signs, last of which we begin reading about today: feeding of the 5000.

The 3rd section is called the Book of Glory, but that is a topic for another day.

For 5 Sundays, beginning with today, Jesus will teach about the bread of life, himself. By the end of chapter 6, it will be clear that some have found his teaching attractive, but too much--too hard. Even the disciples will recognize that it is hard. But when Jesus asks them, do they wish to turn away, is it too hard, they can only answer: it is hard, it is very hard. But it is the only option for them because they have come to see the meaning of Jesus for them.

John understands more fully the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and this understanding is woven through the book of signs and the book of glory, and it begins in the prologue.

Today's reading begins the teaching about the last sign in the Book of Signs: Jesus as the bread of life. The scene opens with the feeding of the 5000 from just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

It begins: People, the crowds, have seen the signs-especially the signs of healing. In this event, one of the things that happens is that healing is further refined: healing and feeding are linked. If the healing points beyond itself, from physical healing to spiritual healing, then here is where Jesus begins to unveil the notion that the feeding he gives is not just feeding of the body.

So, they come for a healing; what they get is a feeding.

But, this is also a picture of discipleship: Jesus engages the disciples—they are critical to the process. They name the problem: too much need for so little food. It is important to note that Jesus does what he does with the disciples fully engaged. He begins by engaging them with a question: how will we feed all these folks?

And then what does he do? With a few loaves and fishes, he feeds 5000 people, with leftovers. But what's going on, besides the feeding?

If this were a strictly Jewish crowd, if Jesus were a strictly kosher guy, there would have been questions to be resolved. Jesus was a good Jewish boy, you'd expect him to follow good kosher laws. Who baked this bread? Was it done correctly, according to our Jewish dietary laws? Have any unclean, non-kosher hands, even touched it?

But the ritual laws that give Jewish people a sense of identity—these don't matter to Jesus.

This begins to break down the definition of religion. Is it a set of cultural practices? Or, is it something else? Could religion instead be joining God's mission of being light to the world.

Furthermore, there are other religious customs broken. It turns out, all are welcome. Jesus radically redefines, again, who is in and who is out. Today, on the mountain, everyone is in. Everyone who wants to be fed is fed. Everyone gets a chance to know Jesus.

What about the leftover bread? What might that point to? Abundance? Abundance from such a small beginning? Mustard seed faith? With a little tiny bit of faith, God can begin.

And then there are the disciples, the ones who, because they participated, were right there alongside Jesus when all this was happening, they had a ringside seat.

What is the sign meaning of the disciples?

What is the meaning is what happens afterwards?

Do you suppose that having participated in Jesus ministry, having seen the miracles, and grasped their deeper meaning, having answered the call to join God's mission in the world, do you suppose that all of this, has anything to do with their ability to trust Jesus when he walks across the wild sea, to bring them peace.

Do you suppose that there is a connection between joining God's ministry to the world, joining the work of Jesus; do you suppose there is a connection between joining God, and learning to trust in God's abundant mercy, and in his love and desire to bring light to us?

And do you suppose that when we join that ministry, and learn to trust, that is when we are finally able to see Jesus, when he comes walking across the troubled sea, to get into our boat?

Is there a connection between joining God's healing work in the world, and finding that, suddenly, we have reached solid ground?

Amen.