

This morning we continue with that wonderful teaching from John on the meaning of Jesus as the bread of life—a teaching of particular meaning to us as a Christian denomination for which the Eucharist is such a primary focus.

But before I do that, I want to just take note that in today's gospel reading, and in next week's, there is a dialogue that Jesus has with a group of people John calls the Jews. Because passages like this have historically been misunderstood, leading to violence against Jewish people across the ages of Christianity, I want to spend just a minute unpacking how John uses the term "the Jews."

When John wrote his Gospel it was around the time that the Jewish sect which would later become Christianity was beginning to attract negative attention from the Romans. This put all Jews at risk, and so there was a movement afoot to separate the Jesus sect from the traditional Jewish sect. A recurrent theme John's writings are writings of encouragement for the Jesus Jews, for if the People of the Way become separate from Judaism, it will put them outside of the normal protection afforded Jews by the Romans. So, they are scared.

All of this means that when Jesus is speaking to the Jews, and when John includes that detail in his gospel, Jesus and John are not speaking against all Jews, or against Judaism itself. In fact, later in his letter to the Romans St. Paul will speak eloquently about the ongoing covenant between God and the Jewish people. So, please remember, as you read John, that none of what he says should be interpreted as antisemitic, and tell your friends too, in case they think the early church itself was antisemitic.

Onward! Bread of Life. "I am the bread of life," Jesus tells us. What a rich, deep metaphor of what it is Jesus gives us. It is a metaphor used to inform the early church of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the fraction anthem that we currently sing is taken from the text of early church writings called the Didache, or the teachings.

Father, even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. To you is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

John 12:24

²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Wise teachings. That for new things to come forth, old things must first die. And that the dying itself is a holy thing—giving a deeper meaning to the death of Jesus himself. His death is holy precisely because it is part of the greater circle of new life. An act which is an act of violence in the minds of those who have done it, becomes an act of offering in the heart of Jesus. A gift of new life. A sign of God's faithfulness to us.

How do we feed on that?

How do we feed on God's abiding faithfulness to us?

Does remembering God's past faithfulness to us help us to trust that God will continue to be faithful to us, when life is hard and we are struggling to hang on? Does that knowledge feed us, comfort us, strengthen us, like a hearty slab of cinnamon bread can? So, there's that. There is this passage of Jesus teaching that he is the bread of life, and its connection with a deeper understanding of the Eucharist as a sign of God's abiding, forgiving, nurturing love.

But of course, bread is real. It is real bread that Jesus used, real bread to cement this sign into the hearts of his disciples, at the last supper. So, now let's look at Jesus as the bread of life from a second angle, the angle of bread itself.

In most agrarian cultures, bread is a staple in the diet. Bread is valued for its ability to fill empty bellies, to provide energy for the day's work, and it is likely to be the main dish at any family meal.

This is yet another layer of meaning to Jesus' statement that he is the bread of life. Jesus is connecting our spiritual hunger, our spiritual work and our communal life of breaking bread together around the supper table, with his ability to lead us into life with God: the more we know Jesus, the more we will know God.

The more we follow the teachings of Jesus, the more we will be spiritually fed by God. The more we come together around the table to be fed by God, the more

we will be nourished by the bread that is Jesus. But how to actually get ahold of this bread?

That's a question we can ask, right? We've already learned, in the last couple of weeks that it is abundantly available. Take a few loaves and a couple fishes, and voila, 12 whole baskets of left-overs! And we've learned that some will come looking for the bread for all the wrong reasons. Not because they want to be fed by God, but because they want to feed their ego.

So, if we know it is abundant, and we aren't coming to Jesus to get worldly gain or any of the other wrong reasons, how *do* we go about getting fed with the Bread of Life?

Happily, the Church has 2000 years or thinking about this, starting with the one I mentioned a few minutes ago, the Didache. The Epistles shed some light, the teachings of the early teachers help some more. St Benedict and his rule help with some guidelines for living as a holy community. St. Theresa instructs on prayer and the interior life. The desert fathers and mothers share pearls of wisdom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses Christian fellowship.

Did you know that the prayer we open worship most weeks, the prayer for purity, comes from a 14th century on prayer called The Cloud of Unknowing? And that its major theme was taken from the teachings of St. Augustine, a 4th century teacher of the spiritual life?

O God, unto whom all hearts lie open unto whom desire is eloquent and from whom no secret thing is hidden, purify the thoughts of my heart by the outpouring of you Spirit that I may love you with a perfect love and praise you as you deserve.

Last week we sang one of my favorite hymns There's a Wideness in God's Mercy. The last verse says this:

For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind, and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind. If our love were but more faithful, we would take him at his word, and our lives would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

The hymns of the church are often an avenue through which God feeds us. How do we get fed Jesus? How does he become our daily bread? This week, as we

remember the words of Jesus, I am the bread of life, lets also remember the words of that hymn, and take it at his word that

Jesus came, comes to feed us,
feeds us with abandon and abundance, when we come to him hungry,
ready to be fed.