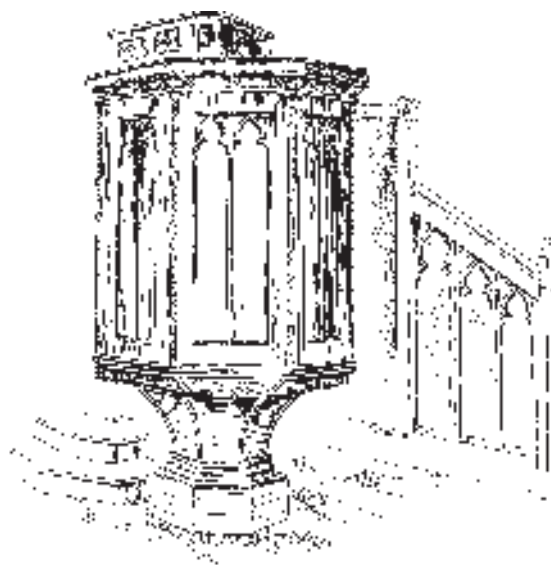


August 2, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

I Am the Bread of Life

A Communion Meditation

by The Reverend Laurie Bruebaker Davis

John 6:35, 41-51

Introduction to the Lesson

Our lesson launches in the middle of the 6th chapter of John's Gospel. This long chapter begins with John's telling of the miracle story we call the "Feeding of the 5000," where Jesus distributes one boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two fish that not only feed, but fill, 5,000 hungry people. They had "as much as they wanted" and still there was more: 12 baskets of leftovers. Yes, this is the Gospel of John where there is *always* more: more wine, more water, more bread—and more meaning.

Metaphors in John run rich and deep. As Eugene Peterson has written about in his book, *The Jesus Way*, metaphor makes us participants in creating the meaning and entering into the action of the word. It is alive and moving, inviting us to participate in the meaning. So here we go, as we enter into Jesus' metaphoric meaning when he says to each of us, "I am the Bread of Life."

Our story begins "the morning after," this crowd that had eaten its fill, went to Capernaum looking for him, clamoring to learn more of this Rabbi named Jesus. When they find him, Jesus is ready to

teach them more. He's ready to build on their actual experience of their bellies filled with bread and fish, yesterday's lunch, to provide the bridge between what they already knew of God, and what more they were about to learn. Well, some of them.

It's time to hear the scripture now, but first let us prepare our hearts to hear what *more* God has to teach us this morning, as we pray for illumination: *We are hungry today, O Lord. Hungry for your nourishing presence. Shine your light deep into our hearts and souls and minds. Ready us to receive the fresh Word you have for us, your Daily Bread of Heaven.*

The Communion Meditation

What does it take to change our minds? What *does* it take to see something we think we already think we understand and know about, from a new perspective? Way back when I was a young adult, I had an experience one morning that made me see myself, and an activity I still enjoy to this day, running (actually the pace would be more accurately described as jogging) in a whole different light. It was a big wake up call I still remember vividly.

This was the morning that a couple of friends and I decided to go running when we were halfway around the world from the USA. We were in the country of Liberia in West Africa, in a small village upcountry called Fahnja, 80 miles northwest of Monrovia. I was with a group of 12 Americans who were there participating in a cultural exchange program through an organization called, Operation Crossroads Africa.

This was probably our second or third morning in this remote village where women and children went to the river to collect water, and where they all farmed rice and casaba to feed themselves. We were there to help them build a small medical clinic by hand, but mostly to learn from each other.

Among this group of 12 young Americans who had just met before we flew to Liberia, were three of us who decided we wanted to "stay in shape" during our summer there and would do so by jogging in the mornings. Great idea, right?

On the first morning of this fitness plan, we met not long after sunrise, did a few stretches and set off on the only road, a rutted gravel road, leading through the village and onto the next one, Mambo, about four miles down the road. Way before Mambo, we turned around and headed back. It was even more humid than Ohio in August; but, we were still proud of ourselves for getting our running going again way out there so far from home. But then as we reentered our village, we started to get quizzical looks from the folks working in the fields, the women carrying the water, the children with smaller water jugs on their heads. Only one man spoke English in the village, but the looks on their faces spoke volumes. All of a sudden it started to dawn on us, how ridiculous jogging just to "stay in shape" must have looked from their point of view.

Growing food was hard, hard work. The reason for growing food was for energy to work and survive. Here every calorie counted, but in the opposite way we usually think. Calories were a precious commodity that sustained the fragile existence made possible by hard work and reasonable weather. What were we doing burning off those calories by jogging nowhere we needed to go? We

weren't bringing an urgent message to someone; we weren't carrying water, plowing fields, or hunting small bush animals. What *were* we doing—we crazy Americans? Yes, you guessed it: that was the first and last time we ran in the village that summer.

And I did learn something that day—something about how very small and limited our point of view and how tiny and little our world really is no matter how much we read, no matter how far we've had the opportunity to travel, no matter how "open minded" we may pride ourselves in being. In fact, the more we know, the more we are invested in a particular system or institution, the more difficult it becomes, to extend or revise our point of view. That is, the view from which we point.

In today's lesson there were some who were ready to make the leap from the story of Moses and the manna in the wilderness, to Jesus being the bread of life standing before them. They could allow that bridge to be built right away, "Sir, give us this bread always." They were ready to connect, ready to be filled by the Bread of Heaven; however their minds entered into that metaphor.

But there were others, in the same crowd, at the same time, who complained and murmured to themselves, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joe, the carpenter down in Nazareth? How can *he* now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Even though they heard Jesus' words, even though they may have eaten some hunks of that bread and tossed some leftovers in one of those 12 baskets, it remained only bread in their bodies. It would never become anything more. That was just bread and this is just the son of Joseph. They were not willing to open themselves just beyond the circle of their tiny, little world as they saw it, before they had their fill of the loaves and fish. They could not allow their understanding of God to be expanded or shifted, not then anyway.

I'm sure that all of us here today, whether we realize it or not, are hungry, deep down, for the very Bread of Life. We are hungry to connect, to reconnect with Jesus, the Bread of Heaven. But sometimes we find it hard to do that. We have questions. We have doubts. Maybe about Jesus. Maybe about ourselves. We may think we're not worthy.

Listen to Jesus' words: "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry." That's right: '*Whoever comes to me.*' That invitation is wide open and unconditional. It's not a worthiness contest. Picture Jesus at the Last Supper, sharing his body and blood, not with just the ones at the table that "deserved" this holy meal—everyone at the table participated. *Everyone*, including Judas who would that very night betray Jesus, and Peter who soon would deny knowing him, not once, but three times.

So yes, it's a hand that Jesus is opening *to all of us* and that includes you. All that Jesus asks of you is to *come* to him, to *come* to the table and allow yourself to be fed the Bread of Life. And here's the waste, the utter waster, the sinful waste of calories at this Table. It's not about running for fitness instead of plowing a field and fetching water, as it was in Fahnja, Liberia. No. The waste is when we refuse or resist or let ourselves go on autopilot even as we worship, so that we don't really come to Jesus and partake in the Bread of Life.

In this amazing ritual of communion, running over with meaning in so many directions and dimensions, we are given the chance to connect at a cellular level with Jesus, the Bread of Life.

And when we do, in that moment we are experiencing eternal life.

Yes, we're just eating a very small piece of bread. Literally, far from anything we'd call a feast. But it is so much more. In the gift of this bread, Jesus gives a way to have new eyes, new hope, new perspective, on whatever we may be facing in our lives as individuals, families, as a church, a nation, a world.

This Table is not about us or our worthiness to receive it. It's about God. It's about Christ dying for us to come to this Table, to "Take and Eat," to truly sink our hearts into this miracle of abundance, where there is more than enough, to heal our spirits, to redirect us, and to deploy us back into the world of hurt and pain. Yes, Jesus feeds us here so that we might be the hands and feet of Jesus now in this world. But we'll talk more about that in next Sunday's sermon.

For now, it is enough, to ready ourselves, to receive the Bread of Life. Let this meal this day open up our tiny, little world, so that we can more fully participate in God's way of abundance, generosity, and forgiveness. We don't have to go to Africa to receive a new perspective. It's right here, waiting. Open your heart and spirit as to receive in this bread that will be passed to you, the Bread of Life.