

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

August 8, 2021 – Pentecost 11 / Proper 14B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus: Delicious and Satisfying*”

Old Testament	1 Kings 19:4–8	(An angel of the Lord ministers to Elijah in the desert)
Psalter	Psalms 34:1–8	(Praise to the Lord who hears our prayers and answers)
Epistle	Ephesians 4:25—5:2	(We are to forgive and love each other, as Christ forgives and loves us)
Gospel	St. John 6:35, 41–51	(Jesus promises eternal life to all who eat of Him as the Living Bread)

When we lived in Cobleskill, New York, the local grocery store’s bakery made what they called “Peasant Bread.” It was crafted with whole grain flour, cracked wheat, oats, barley, polenta, millet, and malt, and packed with sunflower, sesame, pumpkin, and poppy seeds. This resulted in a dense golden brown loaf of complex texture and rich flavor. Our church’s evening Bible Study group shared soup and bread when we met, and the Peasant loaf was always everyone’s favorite. It was so yummy it didn’t even need butter. We can imagine this might be the sort of bread evoked by Jesus’ claim: “I am the bread of life.” Certainly His follow-on claim, “Those who come to me shall not hunger,” might make us think of such a filling and nourishing bread.

What’s your usual bread of choice? Even in the absence of a market survey, we can easily imagine the most popular and most often eaten bread in America is sliced white bread—that stuff with many air holes, squishy texture, consistent lack of color, and a flavor so bland it’s hard to describe.

Americans love it. It’s the perfect platform for peanut butter and jelly, and toasted, it makes a good bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. One of the reasons we like it is precisely because it contributes so little to our experience of food. Tasteless, it doesn’t compete with other flavors. Of little texture, it is easy on the palate; we don’t have to work much to eat it. Predictable in its shape, color, and size, sliced white bread is portion-controlled. Lacking its own nutrients, vitamins are added for our good health. Mass-produced and prominent in our grocery stores, it’s cheap and widely available. It even has preservatives so that we need not be concerned about freshness.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. Have we, in our spiritual lives, reduced Jesus to sliced white bread? Is He simply *there*, but we’re not letting Him nourish us where we most need to be fed? Do we neglect feeding on Him because we don’t have to worry about an expiration date?

What kind of bread comes to mind when you hear “I am the bread of life”? Some might think of pita bread, or dark brown bread, or even matzoh, which in contemporary times we have come to associate with the Last Supper. Yet even that’s not what we use in most churches for communion bread, probably because of “convenience,” which some of us call “tradition.” In the Protestant churches that commemorate the Lord’s Supper, the bread of choice is tiny cubes of conventional white bread. In the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican traditions, we use communion wafers, also called “hosts.”

Is this the “bread of life” to which Jesus likened himself? Many a seminary professor has observed that it is easier to imagine the communion wafer as Christ than to imagine the wafer as “bread.” After all, those little white discs don’t even taste very good, and certainly aren’t filling.

Today’s Gospel reading begins with Jesus’ proclamation: “I am the bread of life.” A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story that has come to be known as “the feeding of the five thousand,” wherein many hungry people are nourished on very little bread. The focus of this story has traditionally been the miracle of the free meal, with little attention given to the bread itself and what it might signify. In the same way that the focus of the mass feeding has been on the miracle and not the food itself, so, too, with today’s proclamation that Jesus is the “bread of life,” we usually focus our attention on Jesus rather than on the bread. But how can we begin to understand what He was saying about Himself until we look more closely at the bread?

This passage from John's Gospel is a lesson about abundance. It is difficult to associate plain white bread, the mass-produced kind, with abundance. It makes a decent carrier for other flavors, but by itself, doesn't have much "tooth." Consider a sampling of breads from smaller bakeries, and the sorts of breads many of us make at home: Banana nut bread, chocolate cherry bread, ten-grain bread, rye with caraway, zucchini and cheese bread, Italian loaf, French baguette, rosemary olive oil bread, challah, and sourdough.

If we are frank, we will admit that our families, friends, and acquaintances are enriched by a diversity of fruits, nuts, and flakes. Why not our bread? When Jesus spoke of Himself as bread, as the Bread of Life; is it possible He was inviting us to a greater feast on Him and in our life of faith? To imagine fullness, texture, boldness, flavor, and satisfying nourishment?

Jesus' ministry was built on the rich foundation of many Bible stories of feeding and being fed. We have one example in today's reading from the Old Testament. In the reading from 1 Kings, Elijah sets out on a long journey sustained by the gift of the angel of the Lord: Food! Not only once does the angel feed the prophet, but twice. The angel commands him: "Get up and eat!" This wasn't just any food; it was *bread*. Elijah "got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." That must have been some nourishing bread!

Jesus was well-acquainted with the Exodus story. He would have known the tradition that the Lord God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years with manna—*bread*—from heaven. It is in the wilderness of the desert as in the wilderness of our souls that we hunger. The Exodus theme permeates John's Gospel, setting up a dynamic between the manna given from heaven to feed the people in the desert wilderness and the Eucharistic bread that feeds us in the wilderness of our souls. Somewhere in the midst of that tension we find the bread of life: not manna from God, not the actual flesh of Christ, but the Bread of Life, *Jesus*, who brings life to our souls, now and eternally.

If this vision of bread given us in St. John's Gospel teaches us something about Jesus, perhaps the first lesson to keep in mind is that Jesus is not simple, plain, or undemanding. Our Lord is many-textured, multifaceted, and complex.

He calls us to love, to forgive, to encourage, and to get involved in ministry and service. He shows us how to welcome, to persist, and to stand firm. Christ is tender as well as righteous; He enjoyed meals with strangers, sinners, and disciples, and He rebuked the rich, the powerful, and the arrogant. Jesus taught in the Temple, raised the dead to life, challenged the complacent to care, wept over the death of a friend, and told great stories. He drank wine at a wedding. He washed filthy feet. He worshiped and prayed.

When we hear Jesus proclaim, "I am the Bread of Life," let us remember all of these things and many more. And as we live our lives and live out our faith, let us be warm and fragrant, rich in texture, bold in flavor, and nourishing to the world. No more white bread in our love of God or others, but rather, abundant faith, abundant life, and abundant living!

Sometimes when I went to the Price Chopper to pick up bread for the Bible Study group, the bakery would hand me a still-hot loaf that had just come from the oven. Those times, I asked for an extra loaf for me and Rick, took it home and immediately spread a little butter on the warm thick slab, crunching happily on all the seeds and nuts. It was delicious and satisfying. So it is with our Lord, the Bread of Life. And so should it be with our life of faith: Delicious and satisfying.¹ *Amen.*

¹ Inspired by Machrina L. Blasdell, "Bread," [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/bread-proper-14-b-2006/), 13 August 2006 <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/bread-proper-14-b-2006/> 3 August 2021.