

I am the bread of life that came down from heaven. In the name of God. Amen.

I.

What was the best thing *before* sliced bread? For that matter, what is the best thing since sliced bread?

Jesus, I reckon. In fact, Jesus is better in such an amazing way that it is beyond our understanding and imagination, really.¹ So he finds some things to compare himself to – everyday relatable experiences and familiar objects and that his listeners can recognize and identify with.

In John's Gospel, there are 7 of them. Today's, "I am the bread of life" (6.35.) I am the light of the world (8.12) for the spiritually blind. I am the door (10.9) for those seeking salvation. I am the Good Shepherd (10.11) for those wandering or lost. I am the resurrection and the life (11.25) for the spiritually dead or dying. I am the way and the truth, and the life" (14.6) for those searching for the meaning of life. I am the true vine (15.1) for those wanting to "branch out" and live a life of meaning and fruitfulness.

John represents a unique prospective among early Christian writings and the Gospels.² Instead of "gospel," John's pervasive emphasis is on "truth." Instead of proclamation, we find a pervasive emphasis on witness. John's gospel is greatly concerned about helping us know the truth about who Jesus is.

Jesus is not simply a man, but the man from heaven. His death is not defeat, but return. Because they believe in him, his followers will be in this world, but not of this world.

I am who I am, *Ego eimi ho on*," Yahweh tells Moses (Exodus 3.13-14). Yahweh is Hebrew for God, The first syllable, "Yah," is feminine, and the last syllable, "weh," is masculine. In Genesis, remember, women and men are created in the *Imago Dei*, image of God, which suggests that God transcends socially constructed notions of gender.³

The names for God are more than a mere distinguishing title. They represent the Hebrew conception of God's divine nature and the relation of God to God's people. The bread that God gives the people in the wilderness is only a foreshadowing of the true and greater bread that God sends in Jesus. John certainly knows this, so when he places the words – I am the bread of life that came down from heaven – on Jesus' lips, he knows full well what he is doing. He is pointing to the identity of Jesus as God.

II.

In a verse that repeats this week from the end of last week's Gospel, Jesus expands on the meaning of his identity as the bread of life, saying, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Now, there is a real danger of hearing this and all the other references to hunger and thirst and making it all about physical hunger and thirst. That is not to say that physical hunger and thirst are not important. They absolutely are.

Two weeks ago, for example, we heard the account of Jesus miraculous feeding of the 5000. It is a story most people

¹ Bert Marshall. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 3.* "Proper 5 (Sunday Between June 5 and June 11 inclusive).. A Homiletical Perspective." (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 99-103.

²David Bartlett *What is Good About This News?* "The Gospel of John." Westminster: Louisville, 2003. 99-106.

³ Names of God. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11305-names-of-god>.

are familiar with: a huge crowd gathers to listen to Jesus. Jesus had gone to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (the Sea of Tiberias). He goes up the mountain with the disciples. As he turns around to sit down to face his followers, he looks up and he sees a large crowd coming toward him.

“Philip,” he asks, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip answers that six months wages will not be enough to feed them (6.4). Can’t you almost hear the sarcasm in Philip’s response? Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, pipes up, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. Some say, that it is the combination of Jesus’ compassion in not wanting anyone to be hungry and the boy’s unselfish generosity in sharing his five bread rolls and a couple of fish that encourages everyone else to share what they have that is the real miracle.

As a result, there is more than enough to feed the whole crowd. So much so that, after the meal, Jesus gives instructions to, “Gather up the leftovers, so nothing is wasted.” Jesus does not leave the people physically hungry while teaching them that there is more to life than physical realities. He deals with the physical realities first. Then, he addresses the issues of spiritual hunger and thirst.

III.

There is a parable about an old tribe that lives together in a circular compound on a tropical island. They have received a great blessing from their god, and so the chief calls for a communal celebration, to which everyone is supposed to bring a jug of palm wine to share. But one of the men in the tribe is stingy, and he does not want to share his palm wine, believing that his wine is far superior to the palm wine made by all his fellow tribe members.

The time comes for the celebration. The chief sets a large vat in the middle of the compound and everyone brings their jug of palm wine and pours it into the vat to share. But this man brings a jug of water instead, thinking that, since palm wine is clear, no one will know the difference. Plus, he figures, what difference will it make if one jug of water is added to the large vat of wine? When it is his turn to contribute to the celebration vat, he does as he planned.

Once all have poured their offerings into the vat, they form a circle and await the chief’s signal to come forward again to fill each of their jugs with the community palm wine. When all is ready and they each have their filled jugs, the chief gives the signal. Each one raises their jug and drinks.

A collective gasp rises from around the compound, for, you see, it is not just one person in the tribe who thinks, “It will make no difference if I add just one jug of water to the communal vat of wine.” Everyone thought the same thing!

IV.

In the words of Joan Chittister, the spirit of God is a wild thing, breathing where it will, moving as it pleases, settling on women and men alike. The spirit of God moves us to new heights of understanding, to new types of witness to new dimensions of life needed in the here and now.

We are Christ’s body in the world. Each and everyone of us is called to live into God’s abundance and generously share that abundance. When one person withholds her or his gifts, the whole community suffers. If any of us fail to do our part, if any of us begin to think that it is okay for us to add a little water to the palm wine, then we need to watch out, because, before long, all we will have is a vat of water!

All things come of thee O Lord
People And, of thine own have we given thee.

Let us pray:

Gracious God. Help us remember who we are – women and men made in your own image and likeness – people

who have been wounded in life. Let your continual mercy refresh us that our past may not limit us. Grant to us, Lord, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, feel the power of your healing and love and enable us to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*