

“Overflowing with Bread”

John 6:1-13

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Jesus was a real renaissance man. He wasn't just a jack of all trades and master of none. Jesus did it all, and he did it all well. His ability to heal is well-known. He was like a fun children's song, able to heal your head, shoulders, knees, and toes...and eyes, and ears, and mouth...and I'm sure even your nose. Practicing as a dermatologist he cured skin diseases. Perhaps more importantly, Jesus a soul doctor, reaching deep within the human psyche and spirit to bring healing and wholeness. He was a darn good preacher, was lauded for being an extraordinary teacher, he could tell a story like nobody's business. Jesus was great with children. He could debate circles around the religious leaders. He knew more about fishing than experienced boat hands like Peter, Andrew, James and John. He was a handyman, working the angles of carpentry with his hammer, saw, and nails. Accountants like Levi and Zacchaeus couldn't make life add up until they followed Jesus. Jesus could strut his stuff on the water and...and, is he supposed to do more? Oh yes, he was an accomplished sommelier, mixing together some 180 gallons of wine on a moment's notice, saving the wedding in Cana and earning a reputation for holding back his special reserve so that the best would be served last. Now on a mountainside high above the Sea of Galilee, facing a crowd of thousands whose stomachs were growling, Jesus puts on a baker's hat and an apron, pulling out of some heavenly oven and so much bread that after everyone had enough to eat there were twelve basketfuls left.

This morning, on World Communion Sunday, bread from around the world will be broken in remembrance of Jesus Christ. On that day when Jesus fed 5,000, he said to the listening crowd, “I am the Bread of Life.” This morning I want you to imagine holding one of those twelve baskets filled with bread, lifting the cover of that basket, and taking a long and deep breath, savoring the aroma of that heavenly bread.

The smell of bread is a wonderful thing. Bread has the ability not only to give us an immediate sense of pleasure. Bread often evokes rich and wonderful memories. A simple whiff of freshly baked bread can transport us to endearing places and those memories are peopled with those who are most precious in our lives. We visited a bakery this past week while traveling and no sooner had I stepped through the doors than I found myself sitting on the grass watching a baseball game on a warm spring afternoon. One of our kids was playing. The others were racing around chasing their friends. Our kids were young and we were all together as a family. Laughter filled the air. Having done McDonald's one too many times, that night I stopped at local store that baked their own bread. The red light was flashing to say the bread was just out of the oven. As the smell of the bread filled the aisles of the store, everything came to a halt. I raced to the front of the line. With the bread safely in my possession, bouncing it from hand to hand to find relief from that steaming hot loaf, I placed a quick order at the deli, and soon our whole family was gathered together out on the ballfield. We broke bread and with a simple slice of salami we had a dinner fit for a king. A memory like that is one you never want to forget. Thanks to the smell of freshly baked bread, I can walk into a bakery in New England and be filled with the rich blessing of a precious time with family that took place two thousand miles away and more than twenty years ago.

Fresh baked bread. Breathe deep. Enjoy. Savor. Fresh baked bread can connect you to the seasons and harvests. Barley bread marked the spring harvest for the people of Israel. Our summer gardens filled with zucchini yield some lovely loafs, and when you add some chocolate chips that zucchini bread is decadent. Pumpkin bread marks the fall. Gingerbread is a favorite treat at Christmas. You can stare at some old, soft and brown bananas and see nothing but overripe fruit needing to be disposed of immediately, or you can peel those mushy bananas and in no time at all a loaf of banana bread will be wafting its sweet smell through the air as the whole house eagerly awaits the delicious first bite from the bread of bananas. I could go on and on about French bread, Italian bread, focaccia bread, whole wheat, rye, raisin and sourdough. You get the drift...when the enticing aroma of bread drifts through the air, it is a powerful means of bringing back the memories.

After eighteen months of prepackaged communion packets, we have returned to using freshly baked bread when we serve communion. Even though we have returned to serving communion in our normal way, we still have not returned to normal as a society, as a nation, as a world. We even face the difficult reality of recognizing we might never return to what once felt normal. Celebrating communion will not return things to whatever pattern of normal we might long to have. But if we lift the lid on this basket of leftovers, if we catch a whiff of the bread that Jesus multiplied, if we breathe deeply of the spirit of the one who said, "I am the bread of life," if we let our hearts be filled with memories triggered by bread that fill the pages of the scriptures, I believe we will find that no matter what type of normal marks our world, we will remember that our God is always with us, that our God always provides, and that our God always has a plan and a purpose.

So there on a hillside high above the Sea of Galilee, having fed a crowd of 5,000, with so many leftovers piled up that it filled twelve baskets, imagine Jesus, who knew the power of human senses better than anyone else, imagine Jesus lifting the lid off one of those baskets of bread, letting the aroma drift out over that crowd, watching their faces fill with delight, and as the wonderful smell lingers in the air, imagine Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life."

What memories might that trigger with the people of Israel? Breathing deeply of that delicious bread that had fed the multitudes, certainly many of them thought of that other miraculous feeding, the manna that fed Israel. As we read earlier this morning, Israel stood in the midst of a great desert, overwhelmed at the vastness of the empty landscape and their complete lack of any means of being fed. Facing a new normal that promised nothing like the good old days in Egypt when they ate garlic and leeks as they sat around pots of meat, the people grumbled. Grumbling. Now that's something we have had plenty of these days. These days have been marked by grumbling. There has been grumbling about toilet paper, grumbling about hand sanitizer, grumbling about masks, grumbling about vaccines, grumbling about travel restrictions, grumbling about issues big, grumbling about issues small,

and pretty much grumbling about everything and grumbling about it all. When God hears the grumbling from the people of Israel, he doesn't use the push of his mighty hand to sweep the people back to Egypt. And he doesn't magically transport them across the Jordan and plop them down in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God leaves them right where they are, in the desert. And then in that desert, God provides bread for them every day. God gives them bread every day for forty years. God did not provide exactly what they hoped for, but God provided exactly what they needed. And here is Jesus, the aroma of that leftover bread triggering memories of manna. As would be proven with every step Jesus took that drew him closer and closer to Calvary, in many ways he was not what the people of God wanted. But now we believe with every fiber in our being that Jesus was exactly what the people of God needed.

I wonder if the smell of bread triggered another memory for those people of Israel. Seeing twelve baskets filled with leftovers, seeing those twelve baskets filled by the twelve disciples who picked up the leftovers that filled those twelve baskets, I wonder if that didn't trigger for at least some a day when twelve men sat down at a table and broke bread. One of those twelve men sat at the head of the table. He was a powerful ruler in the land of Egypt. The other eleven men all belonged to the family of that revered patriarch, the one we know as Jacob. In those days Jacob only had eleven sons. His beloved son Joseph had been killed by some ferocious animals while out watching sheep with his brothers. This family of eleven brothers had been ripped apart by a tragedy and now they had come all the way to Egypt to seek bread in a time of great famine.

I guess you could describe the story of Joseph and his brothers that way, if you were afraid of confronting this story of family strife in all of its ugliness. What really happened is Joseph was treated with favoritism, his brothers got jealous, they grumbled among themselves about what a prideful young man Joseph was, they threw him a hole, sold him into slavery, and then went home and told their father a bald-faced lie that wild animals had attacked and killed their precious little brother. Now those twelve men are seated together at a table. Joseph knows who is

eating his bread with him. Eating bread with him are the very ones who lifted up their heel against him. He could have broken the lives of his brothers as easily as he broke the loaves of bread on that table. But that day, instead of judgment, that day instead of justice, that day instead of vengeance, that day instead of violence, a loud noise arose in that room, around that table, as with tears streaming down his face Joseph offered mercy and forgiveness to his brothers. On that day the grumbling and jealousy halted. On that day there was a tearful and joyful reunion. On that day there was reconciliation. As unbelievable as that story of reconciliation might be, taking a whiff of the aroma arising from those twelve baskets of leftovers, not a single person on that hillside could ever imagine the reconciliation that would take place when that same Jesus who made loaves for the masses would lay down his life for the entire world. And yet now when we break this bread it triggers for us the most profound realization that in Christ Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us. And like Joseph and his brothers experienced reconciliation, the bible calls us to be ambassadors, to share this message of reconciliation with others. Breathe deep of that aroma today, for if we are filled with that aroma we become the aroma of Christ, pursuing and practicing the reconciliation that brings healing and hope to this shattered world in which we live.

There are enough memories of God's goodness and grace to fill all those twelve baskets filled with leftover bread.

- Take a whiff and smell the manna
- Take a whiff and smell the sweet reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers
- Take a whiff and remember Abraham and Sarah preparing loaves of bread for those angels who visited them with such good news, the news of a child that would come within a year, the news that brought them laughter, the news that brought them the promise of Isaac. During a season marked by grumbling, take a whiff of that bread and pray that God will restore laughter to our lives.
- Imagine Naomi and her bitterness, a woman who returned to the town of Bethlehem without husband, without either of her sons, imagine Naomi returning to Bethlehem all alone. And yet even

though she was all alone, there is a sign of hope. As she arrived in Bethlehem, all alone, the barley harvest was beginning.

- Imagine Ruth, who was with Naomi, imagine Ruth a stranger, imagine Ruth a foreigner, imagine Ruth a Moabite, imagine Ruth, the daughter-in-law who would not let go of Naomi...isn't that a sad and strange thing...when we are bitter like Naomi was bitter, when the losses have mounted, sometimes we fail to see that we are not all alone...Naomi had Ruth...and as they returned to Bethlehem the barley harvest was beginning.
- Imagine Boaz, a man with means, a landowner in that town of Bethlehem, imagine Boaz watching that young woman named Ruth working her way around the edges of his vast field gathering a little of the leftover grain. Imagine Boaz not only offering room at the edges of his field, imagine Boaz providing enough so Ruth and Naomi could survive. Imagine Boaz going beyond opening his fields. Imagine Boaz opening his home, opening his heart, taking Ruth as his wife. Imagine the joy when Ruth had a son, when Naomi's bitterness gave way to tears of joy. Imagine when they baked loaves of barley bread in Bethlehem how that aroma was the aroma of life.
- Imagine the author of Ruth, the one who wrote that beautiful ballad about Bethlehem, imagine the author of Ruth smelling that wonderful barley bread baking and writing the final words to the short little book that bears the title of our heroine. "Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon Nahson the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David."
- Take a whiff and remember David, David the shepherd boy, David with his harp, David who slayed Goliath, and ultimately, remember David the king who unabashedly danced before the Ark of the Covenant, and who marked that day of celebration by giving everybody a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and cake of raisins. Imagine a king giving everyone a loaf of bread.
- Imagine...imagine...imagine a King, who took a loaf that was for everyone...a loaf that could fill, a loaf that could satisfy, a loaf that could atone for sin, a loaf that could bring new life...imagine a

King, imagine our King, imagine Jesus taking a loaf of bread that is for every single one of God's beloved children and saying, "This is my body, given for you."

- Imagine Bethlehem, a town whose name can be translated as "House of Bread", imagine what a breadbasket that little town of Bethlehem was on the night Jesus was born. That blessed night of his birth we think of the stable being filled with the smell of animals and smell of hay and the musty scent of shepherds. But this morning, as we lift the lid on the loaves that fed the multitude, can you smell the bread of life that comes with the bun who was once in Mary's little oven?
- Imagine the smell of bread when Jesus sat in the home of Levi the tax collector, the home of Levi filled with all his fellow tax collectors, a home filled with sinners, and imagine Jesus breaking bread with that crusty crowd and saying with absolute joy, "I have come to seek and to save the lost."
- Imagine a son who had turned his back on his family, a child who had lost all that he had, a child whose life was in complete ruins, imagine that lost child making his way home, knowing he had so completely broken all trust that he was not even worthy to be called a child, not even worthy to be called a son. Imagine a son walking the long and lonely path to his father's house, filled with a sense of shame, filled with the reality of his failure, filled with remorse. Imagine a Prodigal Son, a Prodigal Daughter, catching a whiff of something that smelled better than they could have ever hoped for. Imagine catching a whiff of something that reminded you of home, of belonging, of comfort, of care, of safety. Imagine the Father, who watched the path every day in the hope that their beloved child would return, imagine that same Father putting a fresh loaf of bread in the oven every day, every single day, thinking, "If they come home, if my children come home, I want them to smell this bread and know they are welcome, I want them to smell this bread and know they are forgiven, I want them smell this bread and know they are precious, I want them to smell this bread and know they belong...I want them to smell this bread and know they are loved."

We breathe deeply of memories like this when we lift up the lid on the baskets of leftover bread. We breathe deeply of memories like this when we hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life." We breathe deeply of memories like this when Jesus takes bread and blesses it. We breathe deeply, each breath filling our lungs, each breath filling our hearts, each breath filling our souls, each breath filling our spirits...we breathe deeply and let Jesus fill us with the fullness of everlasting and eternal love. We breathe deeply and savor all that it means when Jesus says, "This is my Body, given for you." On this World Communion Sunday, we pray for the day when all people will breathe deeply of the life and love of Jesus Christ, for the day when all people will experience the healing and the hope that are found at this table, for the day when the joy and the peace of Jesus Christ will be embraced by all the people of this earth, for the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord.