

THE BREAD OF LIFE

**First Christian Church and
First Presbyterian Church -- Post, Texas
October 19, 2008**

John 6: 35, 41-51

This week I visited a 55 year-old man from Lamesa at the Lubbock Heart Hospital who had surgery to remove a tumor from his lung. Other than having significant pain from the surgical procedure and experiencing episodes with his heart beating rapidly, Paul has initially received a very promising outcome. Paul and his family and friends are relieved that the cancer was stage one, the cancer was not found in any of his lymph nodes and the pathology report indicated the cancer to be very slow growing. When I stopped by to see Paul on Friday, he was not feeling well but I visited with Paul's good friend, Kenneth, who told me that before Paul came to Lubbock to have his surgery, he went to his pastor and said, "I need my church to be there for me now more than ever!!"

We have all experienced times in our lives when we need the presence of God and others to help us cope with difficult and tragic events that take us by surprise and remind us in very humbling

ways that we are not in control. In the scripture lesson I choose for today Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” What could Jesus possibly mean when he called himself the bread of life?

God gave us a need for bread when God made us with physical bodies and physical appetites. God created our hungers, thirsts, needs, longings and desires and God is in them. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “give us this day our daily bread.” Perhaps our most basic need for daily bread is to remind us of our basic dependence upon God.

In the difficulties and devastations that come our way, we are sometimes reminded about our dependence on others and on God for our most basic needs. Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn and we find ourselves no longer in charge, no longer as independent, self-reliant and autonomous as we assumed we were, and no longer sure we have the resources for a new, strange and frightening future. Whether we experience the death of a loved one, a tragic accident, or an unexpected change in a job, a relationship, or our health, there are times in each of our lives, when we hit a brick wall or find ourselves at a dead-end and we

know that spinning our wheels or continuing to hit our heads against the wall are not truly our best options when it comes to alleviating our pain and misery. When suffering enters our life and life changes for us, either overtime or in the blink of an eye, we realize anew that we are not fully in control and that we desperately need the love, support and resources of our living God for our everyday lives.

John Buchanan, the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago tells the story of Jim and Betsy York who live in Boca Raton, Florida, are devoted Presbyterians and who came to realize their dependence upon God in a new way. “Jim is an orthopedic surgeon who has taken time away from his busy practice over the years to be a volunteer with the Presbyterian Church medical mission in Africa. They’ve done it 15 or 20 times. For several weeks, sometimes several months, Jim and Betsy pack, close their home, say goodbye to the friends and go to the Cameroon or Zaire or the Sudan and work in Presbyterian hospitals, performing surgery in situations very different from the modern operating theaters where Jim is accustomed to fixing shoulders and replacing knees and hips. They are absolutely delightful people; lively, energetic, and gracious. Jim is trim and athletic, loves to golf. He is a big, strong man with a strong grip who is in great shape. They

have begun their retirement and that means more time for them to go to Africa and practice medicine.

Jim and Betsy have family in Chicago and they were in town recently for Jim to have a knee replacement. During the surgery, which he has performed thousands of times, something unplanned happened during the administration of the anesthesia, a tiny slip. Jim York woke up to find himself paralyzed from the waist down. Because of their relationship with the Presbyterian Church I received a call about them and began to visit them in the hospital and then in rehab. Last Saturday, they flew back to Florida; Jim strapped in his wheelchair.”

John Buchanan said, “The day before they left I talked with them at length. This active, strapping man was devastated initially. But now he’s angry—not at God—but that he can’t go to Africa next month. “I’m going,” he said, ‘even if I have to operate out of this contraption. Betsy said, ‘We’ve prayed a lot these past few weeks and while we don’t believe God made this happen, we do believe that God is going to get us out of it somehow, or make something out of it, or give us what we need to make something out it.’ Jim brightened up and said, ‘it’s already happening. The Senior Highs in our church have invited me to meet with them and talk about

how we're coping and how we're going to deal with this adversity.' And he explained that his pastor had told them that they had already removed part of a pew so Jim could sit in his favorite spot in the sanctuary next Sunday. "We're just going to have to learn to depend a little more on God," Jim York said. His words testify to the fact that he has indeed partaken of Jesus, the bread of life, and has been given, in the face of devastating adversity, the courage to go on living.

It was the great thinker Karl Barth, whose sharp insight into human nature led him to conclude that our real problem with asking God for things that we need in life isn't that we don't believe God can and will respond to us or that there are some things for which we have no business asking God or anyone else, for that matter. The real problem, Barth said, is we don't like to have to ask God for anything. We don't like the implied dependence. We prefer to believe that we can provide for ourselves.

While we never feel we can ever have enough, compared to the world's population, most of us do quite well providing for our needs and our wants. Sometimes I truly believe that Kyle and I provide a little too well for our children. A few years ago I did a wedding in San Antonio and we went a few days early to be able to

go to Schlitterbahn, a water park in New Braunfels. Since we planned on being at the water park all day, Kyle and I had decided to save some money and stay two nights at the Motel 6 in San Marcos. That summer, Elliot was seven and Katherine was three and when Elliot walked into our very basic hotel room and looked around and noticed that there weren't any little bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion in the tiny bathroom, he quickly ran back to the parking lot as we were unloading the car and asked, "is this the hotel where poor people stay?" I very quickly explained to him that he was a spoiled brat and that poor people did not even have the money to stay at Motel 6. Katherine interrupted my little tirade with, "Mama, I don't like this Motel 6. Can we, please, go and stay at Hotel 7?!"

I would like to be able to report that as my children have gotten older they have developed a better understanding and appreciation of money and are okay with staying a night or two at a less expensive hotel when we are spending big bucks on a vacation. However, this summer when we went to California and pulled into a Motel 6 late one night, they awakened and groaned and loudly proclaimed, "We will give you all of our allowance money for two months if you please let us stay at a nicer hotel!" Staying at Motel 6, even for one short night, cramps my children's comfort level and

exposes them to people and places that are outside of how they want to define themselves and their world.

In a Christian Century article (2/22/05) entitled, “**Spectacular Failure,**” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Like everyone else, we live in a culture that adores success, and that never seems to tire of raising the bar. Being a successful human being means making straight A’s, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to an attractive person, raising well-adjusted children, and not gaining too much weight. Judging from the commercials on television, being successful also means driving a hot car, carrying a cool cell phone, having young-looking skin and choosing the right medicine to beat depression for good and other ailments that I will not talk about in church!”

Barbara Brown Taylor says that all of these standards for success leave a lot of room for failure. And the same culture that sets us up for failure does not adequately equip us to deal with failure. My children have grown up with more things and opportunities than I ever knew possible at their young ages and I can only hope that someday when life deals them a difficult predicament or tragic situation, they will know at a deep and helpful level that all of life is pure gift and that we are each desperately dependent upon the

love and strength of God incarnated in the people in our everyday lives.

In one of my favorite books, **The Sacred Journey**, Frederick Buechner says, “When it comes to putting broken lives back together, the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do---to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst---is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own.

Surely that is why, in Jesus’ sad joke, the rich man has as hard a time getting into Paradise as that camel through the needle’s eye because with his credit card in his pocket, the rich man is so effective at getting for himself everything else he needs that he does not see that what he needs more than anything else in the world can be had only as a gift. He does not see that the one thing

a clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from God himself, a helping hand.”

There will come a day in the precious lives of my dear children, as it came to my friend from Lamesa this week and to John Buchanan’s friend, Jim York, when Elliot and Katherine will learn that their resources are simply not enough. A day comes to us all when we find that we’ve reached deeply into our own reserves and there’s nothing left, that we have spent all we have physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually and that our hands come up empty. It is then time for us to acknowledge the truth of our need and to throw ourselves on the mercy and providence of God, a God who has promised to feed us with the bread of life.

What is the bread of life that Jesus names? In an earlier episode in the Gospel of John, the disciples have gone looking for bread and when they return with food and say, “Rabbi, eat!” Jesus answers, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” With this response, the disciples perhaps think someone else has beaten them there and slipped Jesus a roast beef sandwich. Jesus helps them to understand by saying, “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to accomplish his work. Look, the fields are ripe for harvest!” On that day, Jesus reminded the disciples and us that our

greatest needs are met and our deepest hungers are fed when we are doing our Father's work in this world. We very comfortable Christians, so concerned with right doctrine and correct beliefs, need to be reminded that it is in helping and being present to those who suffer that we find healing, hope and the transforming presence of God in our lives again and again.

In my years of being with people who have suffered tragic losses and lived through devastating circumstances, I have witnessed that the ones who have been able to experience some healing in their lives and find faith, strength, meaning and purpose once again are the ones who find ways to reach out to others and offer their love and presence when it is needed most. There is the couple whose 23 year-old son died in a car accident nine years ago who accompanied another couple to a support group for grieving parents after their 20 year-old college son died in a car accident. There is the man who throws a big party every year on his deceased mother's birthday for all the residents of the nursing home where she lived out the last three years of her life. There is the woman who was very poor as a child and often went to bed with her stomach aching from hunger pains, who now serves on the board of the South Plains Food Bank and does her best to see that people in this area don't go hungry.

I tell my children often that life is not fair or predictable and that we often find ourselves in difficult, challenging and very painful circumstances. When problems come, I tell them it is okay to feel sorry for themselves and to rant and rave about how the world is not going their way for 20 to thirty minutes a day and then they need to get on with the business of living, remain open to the surprises of grace and life that come from unexpected places and always find ways to serve and help others.

When we find ourselves overwhelmed with the events that life presents to us, may we reach out to God and others and know that in the midst of our chaos and grief, the bread of life will truly sustain us and see us through to a new day and a new place where we can once again affirm the goodness of life and cherish the bonds of love, friendship and faith that are truly sacred. As Dr. Jim York said after his tragic knee surgery, “We’ve prayed a lot these past few weeks and while we don’t believe God made this happen, we do believe that God is going to get us out of it somehow, or make something out of it, or give us what we need to make something out of it.”

And Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God, we gather on this beautiful autumn morning hoping to experience a sense of the holy and be filled by the bread of life. We come to this place grateful for the community we experience here with people we have known much of our lives. We come needing to be fed by the soulful things we can not acquire by our own very savvy resourcefulness, by working harder and longer, becoming smarter, or knowing the right people. In our search for greater meaning, purpose, healing and love, we are reminded that while we can survive on our own and even succeed on our own, we can never become human or whole by our own efforts. We pray on this day for the courage and inspiration we need to give more of our time, energies, talents, money, and resources to the spiritual reality of life that we can neither see nor grasp for very long but which nurtures and challenges us over the long-haul of our lives. As we find ways to be more involved in your holy purposes in our midst, we pray our lives might be a reflection of the love that has claimed us and the grace that continues to sustain us.

We acknowledge that in handling the many aspects of our lives this past week we have been too consumed by our busy agendas and

too oblivious to the presence of God and the activities and relationships that feed our souls and nurture the river of life that runs deep within us all. O God, help us to stop a little each day and give thanks for the lot that is our life –for the good that nourishes and sustains us and for the bad that reminds us of our dependence upon you and our community. With grateful hearts, help us to see that all of life is pure gift and enable us to more fully open our lives and be fed by the daily bread our Lord seeks to provide. Help us to know that it is hugely more important for us to show your love in our broken world than it is to hold correct beliefs and express accurate church doctrine.

We ask that your presence would be a guide to our loved ones who are sick, grieving, heartbroken, hurt, depressed, and struggling with life-changing issues. During these times of tumult and distress, it is very difficult to see clearly or to know how to pray. Help us to pray for them and with them and to find creative ways to be God's heart and hands to them so that we are all made more whole by life's difficulties and tragedies. In the name of the one who claims us as his own and binds us together as one, we pray, Our Father,...Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Second Baptist Church

September 21, 2003

Loving and Gracious God, we have gathered on this beautiful autumn morning to worship You and to be fed by the spiritual things we can not acquire by our own very savvy resourcefulness, by working harder and longer, or by knowing the right people. In our search for greater meaning, purpose, healing and love, we are reminded that while we can survive on our own and even succeed on our own, we can never become human or whole by our own efforts. We pray on this day for the courage and inspiration we need to give more of our time, energies, talents, money, and resources to the spiritual reality of life that we can neither see nor grasp for very long but which nurtures and challenges us over the long-haul of our lives. As we find ways to be more involved in your holy purposes in our midst, we pray our lives might be a reflection of the love that has claimed us and the grace that continues to sustain us. In the name of the One who is our way, our truth, and our life, we pray, AMEN.