

# **THE SUSTAINING BREAD OF LIFE**

**Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches  
August 9, 2009**

**John 6: 35, 41-51**

My family says that I am a food snob because I pretty much refuse to eat fast food; if I can't eat good tasting, high quality food, I probably won't eat. If Kyle and the kids choose to stop at Sonic or What-a-burger, I will make myself eggs or eat leftovers. My theory is life is too short to eat bad food! I also feel the same way about religion. Life is too short to put up with bad religion and like fast food, if I can't find meaningful worship experiences, I'd rather not go to church and critically knit-pick the shortcomings of hokey, boring or irrelevant religion.

In our scripture lesson 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. And being the food snob that I am, when it comes to bread, I want fresh, crusty good bread either

dipped in olive oil or clothed in real butter! 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 primal dependence upon God on a day-to-day basis.

In my work with dying people, I am regularly reminded that all any of us really has is today and I don't know about you, but the daily bread I need from God has to be of high quality and filled with great nourishment and sustenance because my daily emotional and spiritual needs are sometimes immense. My everyday life is filled with hassles at home and at work, squabbles with my husband and children, office politics, making nice with family and neighbors, and not to mention the worries I have about my aging body, our money, our children's futures and many unresolved struggles that sometimes keep me up at night. Thus, the bread of life I need to keep me going is daily reminders that life is pure gift, that faith will give me strength, character and purpose, that our living was never meant to be easy or fun, that it is helpful and more becoming to keep whining, griping, and feeling sorry for myself to a minimum, and that every day my God wants me to find ways to use my passions, talents, money, time and resources to make this world a better place!

Our scripture for this morning gently reminds us while Jesus is concerned about our physical hungers, more food is not usually the answer. Here Jesus lets us know that a transformed way of living and bringing life and hope to others will feed our spiritual hungers and renew our bodies, minds and spirits. (Paraphrased from **Lectionary Homiletics**, August-September 2009, Mitzi Minor, p.15)

When I send my children to church camp in the summer, I am hoping that they will learn more about the love of God that has created them and our world and the grace of Christ that sustains our living and calls us to a different way of being in our world. I am hoping that they will be fed from the “bread of life” and will come home assured of God’s infinite love for them and challenged to be the bread of life to others in concrete ways that infuse our world with love, life, healing and hope. Maybe my hopes for a meaningful church camp experience are too high and I am not sure if my 14 year-old-son received much “good bread” from being at Ceta Canyon in June with his Methodist friends.

When I picked Elliot up from the church after being gone for five days, he was eager to let me know that one of his counselors told him that God always answers our prayers, “God either tells us yes,

no, or not at this time.” He also said that an annoying college counselor told them she “felt sorry for the poor Indian children they went to school with that didn’t know Jesus because if they died tomorrow in a car accident, they would surely go to hell.” After discussing the matters of prayer and eternal damnation, I asked Elliot if there was anything else of substance that he learned at church camp and he said, “Well, Mom, during one of the worship services the minister asked all of the boys who had a problem with pornography to come to the front and then asked the girls to come forward to put their hands on their backs to heal them of their problems!” I was now hot and wanted to call the Methodist bishop and give him a piece of my mind but instead I visited with Elliot and we continued our lifelong conversation about these matters. I was asking Elliot yesterday to clarify the details of his experience and he wanted me to be sure to let everyone know that he did not go forward!

I don’t know about you, but I want more from my religion and church experiences than salvation scare tactics, shallow attempts to explain the mysteries of God, or inappropriate actions which single out normal, budding curiosities and label them sins that no one is able to sensitively deal with in a church camp setting for 13 and 14 year olds!

Maybe it is asking too much at church camp but I would hope for more thoughtful discussions about life and faith and about how our Christian beliefs desperately matter in our everyday living and in times of great crisis. 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 there comes a time in all of our lives when we are dependent solely upon the love and strength of God to see us through.

There will come a day in their precious lives 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.

One night a few weeks ago, I was having trouble sleeping and I went to the kitchen to unload the dishwasher and watch television.

The television was tuned to sports and I happened to catch the end of the 2009 ESPY Awards on ESPN. The ESPY awards are given each year to notable athletes at all levels of competition and I was half watching as I worked. However, when Coach Don Meyer of Northern State University, the “winningest” coach in all of college basketball, received the Jimmy Valvano Award, I was in awe of his acceptance speech. I learned that Coach Meyer is a well-known and respected small-college basketball coach who was involved in a near-fatal highway collision last year with an 18-wheel truck. During emergency surgery to save his life, non-operable cancer was found in his liver and other places in his body. Following the initial surgery, he had to have a leg amputated. He came back to coach the season from a wheel chair – beginning at 5:30 in the morning the day after he was released from the hospital.

Kyle was able to find his acceptance speech on U-tube and transcribed it for me to share with you this morning. This is what Coach Meyer had to say when he accepted the 2009 Jimmy V Award. “Thank you. We don’t have any teleprompters in South Dakota, so I ‘m just going to read this if that’s okay. I’m just a small college coach from Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota; that means when I leave the hotel tomorrow morning at 4:15, I’ll take all the soap, shampoo and even the

shower cap. (Coach Meyer is bald!) That means I know how to make a 17-hour drive to spend a 2 hour home visit with a recruit and his family then get back in the car and make a 17 hour drive home.

If I had not coached 40 years in small colleges I probably wouldn't have developed the toughness to successfully negotiate the past ten months. Yesterday, I was fortunate to visit with coach John Wooden, and he gave me this card with guidance his father gave to him upon his graduation from grade school. One of his dad's favorite pieces of advice was the following: "Don't whine. Don't complain. Don't make excuses." Every time I've gone to rehab workouts, these three statements have slapped me right in the face. As I glance around the room I see that everyone doing their rehab with me has it much tougher than I do.

The "F" word has been, unfortunately, used highly in our world today, and we use it in our basketball program also. Our "F" words are: Faith, Family and Friends. Faith that God has a reason for sparing my life at this time so that I can try to serve others for a few more years. Family such as my wife, Carmen, our children, Jerry, Brooke and Brittany who give me constant concern, care and prayer; I would not be here tonight if my wife of 42 years had not

devoted her entire time to totally bringing me back from where I was. Friends, like our current team, all of my former players and coaches from all over the country who encouraged me with letters, emails, phone calls, and visits – and spent nights sitting with me all night long so my wife could rest so she could stay up the next day and make all the big decisions. I’ve learned from this odyssey that peace is not the absence of troubles, trials and torment, but rather peace is calm in the midst of them.

I first met coach Jim Valvano at a Nike clinic we were speaking at in San Francisco. When I sat with him in the hospitality room he showed me how one human being could speak, tell jokes, laugh and entertain us all for an hour without breathing. The man lived each moment to the fullest. He was high on life. He was the kind of guy who never wasted an at-bat. He always swung from the heels for the fences, and he never got cheated, not one time. And, you know, that’s the way I would like to live the rest of my life, and I think you would too. Jim Valvano achieved every goal he set for himself in life and his career as a coach. When he reached the end of his run on this earth he set one last goal, find a cure for cancer. And with all of us helping the Jimmy V foundation, I think he’ll nail that one, too. Thank you.”



Coach Meyer's words testify to the fact that he has indeed partaken of the bread of life, and has been given, in the face of devastating adversity, the courage to go on living. 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.

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."

My preaching professor from seminary, the Rev. Stephen Shoemaker, wrote an article a few years ago for the Christian Century (July 5, 2000) entitled, **Bread and Miracles** that tells about how his former congregation, The Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth was nurtured and fed by their ministry to the hungry and homeless. Steve Shoemaker, says that while God wants hungry people fed, God also wants more than our stomachs to be filled and that through their ministry to the hungry, his church was able to keep alive their focus, their mission and their dependence upon God.

Steve said that on Thursday evenings for several years, Broadway Baptist Church has thrown open its fellowship hall to the homeless and sits down with them to eat a family-style meal together. “We call it our Agape Meal. There are tablecloths, cut flowers and platters of delicious food with identifiable meats, but the most crucial and most wonderful thing is that over the years the church and the homeless people have become friends. One guest said, ‘we know the food is good because you sit and eat it with us.’ After the meal we worship around the tables and fair warning is given and over half leave before the first song. One guest said, ‘thanks for giving us our freedom of religion!’”

Steve continued, “After worship we offer communion in the chapel next door and about 15 come each week. Some weep as they come down the aisle. They thought they’d never take communion again because when you lose your home you often lose your access to the sacraments. The exclusion of economics keeps thousands of people from the Lord’s Table every week. What must Christ be thinking?”

Steve goes on to talk about the bread of life broken and shared in this place each week. “The schizophrenic woman trying to stay safe and on her meds says that this night gets her to the next Thursday night because here she feels beloved and treasured. Wayne, an older man, lived behind the Pizza Hut and kept warm in an electric blanket the manager let him hook up on cold nights. For the last three years of his life, before he was killed in a car crash, he said this weekly meal kept him alive. A young girl who lives in a cheap motel with her mother comes every year for her birthday meal. A talented African-American man who has led our singing on Thursdays battled through several seasons of recovery and relapse with his chemical addictions, and is now married and a new father.”

“There is Mary, who would not speak a word or look at a person when she first came, but one night spoke before our entire congregation of 700, and ‘Tree,’ a huge lumberjack of a man with a bushy beard and bandanna and a voice that sounds like a giant tree splitting down the middle, who gives thanks for ‘the head dude,’ the unseen provider for the meal. And then there was a young teen who was so touched by the tenderness and love one night that she went to a phone, called her mother, and said she was coming home.

Steve says, “the meal is Exodus and Passover, the shadow of death and the miracle of life each week. One Thursday, a middle-aged Hispanic man came for communion. As I served him he made the sign of the cross and tears streamed down his face. Afterwards I said glibly, ‘Come back next week. The food is always good.’ He stopped me. ‘The food’s not why I come,’ he said as he nodded toward the fellowship hall. ‘This is why I come,’ pointing to the bread and the wine.”

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 summer 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.

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, feeds us daily with the bread of life and binds us together as one, we pray, Our Father,...AMEN