

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: September 13, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE BREAD OF LIFE”

John 6:1-15, 25-35

- ☑ {Bruce Springsteen} **“Everybody’s got a hungry heart.”**

I have **“a hungry heart,”** and so do you. To be human is to desire, to yearn, to crave, to thirst, to hunger.

❓ There is no need to ask, ‘Are you hungry?’ The question is, ‘What are you feeding your soul?’

The language of longing makes some churchgoers uncomfortable. It evokes in them feelings of alarm, shame, and possibly disgust. They behave as though God’s objective is to purge us of our cravings.

These people make excellent Buddhists, but lousy Christians. Granted, our appetites can be put in service to sin; even so, discipleship is about transformation, not suppression. The Holy Spirit does not inhibit our desire – he *sanctifies* it, utilizing it for his holy purposes.

Please repeat after me: *“I hunger.”*

❓ **“Everybody’s got a hungry heart.”** What are you feeding your soul?

- ☐ I invite you to turn with me to John 6:25-35.

■ Verse 25: **“When they found him [Jesus] on the other side of the lake, they asked him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’”**

A little background is helpful here.

- Earlier in this chapter, in verses 1-15, Messiah miraculously feeds a huge crowd, numbering 5,000 men plus uncounted women and children. Philip estimates that

“Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a [single] bite!”

But there is a boy with **“five small barley loaves and two small fish.”** Jesus borrows his meal and multiplies it a thousand times or more. Everyone eats **“as much as they [want]”** – with twelve baskets of leftover bread to spare!

Aside from the resurrection, this is the only miracle reported in all four gospels. It is an amazing demonstration of power and compassion.

Yet it reveals much more than that.

- In verse 4 John puts a timestamp on the feeding: **“The Jewish Passover Festival was near.”**

Passover is the defining festival of Judaism. It celebrates Israel’s political and spiritual liberation by YHWH after 400 years of slavery in Egypt.

At the first Passover, Israelite families gathered to sacrifice a young sheep or goat. Using a branch of hyssop, they marked their door frames with the animals’ blood. Then they ate roasted lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

{Ex 12:12, 27} That night the Living God struck down every firstborn Egyptian, but he **“passed over”** the homes that were marked by blood. The LORD spared the Hebrews and the Pharaoh released them.

Ever since, observant Jews have celebrated Passover, and for seven days they do not eat bread with yeast in it. This is not only about remembrance; many Jews believe that when they keep Passover and

the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they are literally participating in the original events alongside their ancestors.

This Jewish crowd whom Jesus miraculously feeds has Passover on their minds.

- {Mt 14:13-16; Mk 6:32-36; Lk 9:10-12} As for geography, in verse 1 John locates this event on the eastern shore “**of the Sea of Galilee.**” Matthew and Mark depict the area as ερημος [erēmos], “**solitary**” or “**desolate.**” This is also the word for “**wilderness**” and “**desert.**”

¶ And in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the disciples advise Jesus to “**Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy...some food,**” because “**we are in a remote place,**” a place that is ερημος, a “**desert place,**” a “**wilderness place.**”

Where did God lead Israel after Passover? He led them into the desert, the wilderness, the ερημος.

{Ex 16:4, 18} What did YHWH feed them out in the desolation? He fed them manna. The LORD caused bread to “**rain down... from heaven.**”

First century rabbis teach that the giving of manna was Moses’ greatest work. Furthermore, they contend that when Messiah comes he too will give Israel bread from heaven.

In brief: “**The Jewish Passover Festival [is] near**”; Jesus and the crowd are out in the ερημος, as Moses and Israel were; and Jesus feeds an enormous crowd with miraculous bread, as God fed Israel miraculous bread under Moses’ leadership.

- {Jn 6:14} The people begin to connect the dots, and they get excited: “**Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.**”

- {Jn 6:15, TNIV / NLT} Fired up as they are, “**They [intend] to take [Jesus] by force and make him king**” – and although he is indeed The King, he is not their kind of king. And so he withdraws from them, going “**higher into the hills by himself.**”

- Skipping down to verse 25, the crowd comes looking for the Lord. Upon finding him they ask, “**Rabbi, when did you get here?**”

- Messiah immediately changes the subject. Verse 26: “**Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.**”

‘You didn’t track me down because you saw God in my actions and want more of *him*; you did it because I filled your bellies, and you want more *bread*. You jump at the chance to nourish your *bodies*, but you pass up the opportunity to feed your *souls*.’

- In verse 27 he urges: “**Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.**” Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, “**Don’t waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides.**”

This is not a criticism of our necessary efforts to feed ourselves, it is a warning: Do not seek lesser gifts and fail to receive God’s greatest gift! Do not cater to

your physical cravings while ignoring your spiritual hunger!
Do not stuff your body and starve your soul!

★ This crowd has gone out of their way to find Jesus. Still, they are not seeking the *presence of God*; they are seeking *presents from God*.

Do you hear the difference? They are following Jesus in order to obtain physical food. Meanwhile, their souls are going hungry.

{Lk 12:15} How many people profess to be Christians but live as though satisfaction “**consists in an abundance of [money] and possessions**”?

How many believers are not even aware of their inward hunger because they constantly fill up on activity, entertainment, religion, or literal food?

{The Feast} How many churchgoers are “[starving] **to death while growing fat on that which is not bread**”?

It does not have to be this way!

■ Verse 35: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”**

{Jn 1:4} This is a profound theological declaration. As physical bread sustains the body, so Jesus of Nazareth sustains the spirit. **“In him [is] life”!**

These words are also a compassionate and generous invitation. Messiah feels our hunger and says, **“I am the bread of life.”** He feels our desire and says, **“[come] to me.”** He feels our craving and says, **“[believe] in me.”**

{Jn 6:54-57} Later in this chapter Christ Jesus clarifies and complicates things when he proclaims:

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as ...I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”

Notice that those who simply *visit* the bakery, and even linger there for a long time, are not said to have life.

Those who have *objective knowledge* of the bread, who study its properties and inspect it and smell it, are not said to have life.

Those who merely talk *about* the bread, who make a show of loving it, and who testify with great conviction about its goodness, are not said to have life.

★ No! It is only those human beings who really partake of **“the bread of life”** who **“live because”** of him. Sharing in his life, joining with him, being united with him in intimate relation is essential.

It is possible to be an active member of a faithful Church, study Scripture inside and out, master orthodox Christology, and confess personal faith in Jesus, and never partake of **“the bread of life.”**

It is even possible to eat and drink the sacramental elements of Holy Communion every time it is offered, and not partake of **“the bread of life”** – just like the crowd that listened to Messiah teach and ate the miraculous physical bread.

In the end, it comes down to what we rely upon for fulfillment, for purpose, and for life.

Why is there longing in our hearts? We desire, we yearn, we crave, we thirst, we hunger because there is such a thing as bread, **“the bread of life.”**

Or, as Pascal put it, **“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man [human] which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”**

God forbid that we should **“work for food that spoils”!** Let us **“work for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give [us].”**

Hear again the word of the Lord Jesus: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”**

Amen! Amen! Amen!