

“The Bread of Life”  
John 6:35, 41-51  
Sunday, August 9, 2015  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

A mother was getting her five-year-old daughter ready for church and the little girl asked, “Mom, why do we go to church?”

Her grandmother, who happened to be in the same room, answered, “Baby, we go to Church to find Jesus!”

Later in church Mom noticed her little girl looking all around. And after church the little girl said, “Mom, I looked all over that church for Jesus and I couldn’t find him nowhere.”

The crowds in our reading from John are kind of like that little girl. They are following Jesus to get fed and healed, sure. But they are also watching and waiting and hoping for the Messiah to come. They watch and listen to Jesus, wondering, “Is He the One?”

Billy Strayhorn writes:

“Jesus all but says, ‘Hey guys, it’s me.’ He does everything but put on a big red t-shirt with the word ‘Messiah’ on it in big white letters.

“But the people’s response is less than thrilling. Their reaction is, ‘Whoa, wait a minute. Isn’t this Jesus? Isn’t this the kid who grew up in Nazareth, whose father Joseph was a carpenter? Isn’t this Jesus, Mary’s son? We know him. How can HE be the Messiah? Where does HE get off telling us he’s the ‘Bread from heaven?’”

**I. Christianity is not “spiritual.”**

United Methodists are kind of like the crowd. We tend to prefer a domesticated version of Jesus. We’re not sure he did miracles. We’re not sure he is God come down to earth to live

among us. We read the Bible, we go to church, we are good people who do our best to figure out what God wants us to do. And we try to do it.

But we can get a bit squeamish when it comes to admitting out loud that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God, the One who is and was and will be.

For one thing, we worry that it's not polite. What about other churches? What about other religions? What about atheists and agnostics? It's rude to say we know the truth and they don't. We're a tolerant denomination. We don't want to say that people are going to hell if they don't believe the way we do. John Wesley once said, "If your heart is as my heart, then take my hand," or words to that effect. And we take him at his word, although he would be aghast to hear anyone say that Jesus is not the only way to God. Wesley meant that, if you love Jesus, let's join hands and work together to serve the poor and to bring others to Christ. Nowadays we Methodists reinterpret Wesley's openness. I think we go too far at times. It's certainly a good thing to work with people of all religions and to respect people whose views differ from our own. But we have to hold true to the core our faith, or we become no faith at all.

Will Willimon, a United Methodist Bishop, talks about this tendency in terms of spirituality. He writes:

"One of the greatest contemporary impediments in comprehending this [passage from John] is the widespread but clearly erroneous impression that Christianity is spiritual.

'Spirituality' has been 'in' for some years now. Apparently, many North Americans long to be lifted out of the muck and mire of the everyday. What is here, the stuff of ordinary life, is not enough for us. We want to rise above that, to go higher, to ascend. As modern, scientific people, we have learned so much about everything we can taste, and touch, and feel. In the process, the world got demystified, explained, unbearably flattened and figured out. We

therefore long to peek behind the veil, to penetrate the less obvious.”

Daniel Tosh talks about this concept, using the language of comedy.

Now I would not want to recommend Daniel Tosh from the pulpit. Will Willimon is a far more appropriate, respectable person to quote.

If you don't know who Daniel Tosh is, you do not have young adult men living in your home. Tosh is a rude, crude comedian, formerly Christian, raised in a pastor's home. Which is a tale of warning for me, I suppose. Daniel Tosh is the wacky, offensive-yet-often-charming host of the Tosh.O comedy YouTube review. He's frequently hilarious, often distasteful, and always irreverent.

Disclaimers aside, I want to share one Tosh bit with you. It is my belief that this one comes from his Christian roots, and that it suggests he might one day return to those roots.

Here's Tosh's take on the concept of 'spiritual':

“When I meet someone new and they say, ‘I'm not religious; I'm spiritual,’ I say, ‘Well, I'm not honest, but you're really interesting!’”

To claim that we are spiritual but not religious is to say that we have not gone deeply into a particular faith community. It is to say that we are open to everything and committed to nothing. It is a superficial, naïve, trivial approach to connection with God. At the same time, those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious” are clearly searching. They are hungry for more; they are like the crowds who chase after Jesus, aware that they need something; not sure, exactly, what that something is. We must come alongside them and support them in their search.

By way of contrast, I share with you these words from Pastor O. Benjamin Sparks:

“A recent document released by the Vatican to clarify Pope Benedict's encyclical *Dominus Jesus* stirred an international controversy because it appeared to restate a former

Roman Catholic dogma that no one could be saved outside the church – that is, the Roman Catholic Church. Several Protestants and the religious leaders of other faiths squealed like stuck pigs. They loudly sounded off to the media, saying that this claim set ecumenical and interfaith relations back by a century or so. The Catholic Church replied, asserting that this is not a new teaching, and is no different from the ecumenical teachings of John XXIII and John Paul II...

“Someone defended Pope Benedict’s claim with these words: ‘unity based on a whitewashing of differences...is a façade and only stills fruitful dialogue.’ Everyone, says Jesus, who has heard and learned from [God the] Father comes to me. There is no salvation outside the church. That is a refreshing, renewing word for our disjointed days” (*emphasis added*).

## **II. The “I am” statements of Christ.**

Jesus speaks the truth about himself in a direct way. Parts of the Gospel of John are confusing and unclear. But the “I am” statements of Jesus are crystal clear. As Strayhorn says, it’s like Jesus wears a bright red T-shirt emblazoned with ‘Messiah’ in big white letters. Jesus says, “I am...”

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). “I am the bread of life” (6:35). “I am the light of the world...the door...the good shepherd...the true vine...the resurrection and the life” (8:12; 10:9 & 11; 15:1; 11:25).

Statements like these create a “crisis,” according to Willimon. “We are pushed to a decision: Is he really who he says he is?”

Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” which suggests nourishment. If we get our bread from sources other than Jesus, we are turning our backs on Jesus. We are turning to idols rather than relying on the one who claims to be “the way, the truth and the life.” Now we can choose to say that Jesus is not who he claims to be. But, as C. S. Lewis wrote in his oft-quoted book, Mere

## Christianity:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg -- or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.”

“I am the bread that came down from heaven.” This bread that Jesus offers does not come from the earth. It is not provided by human productivity or human inspiration. It comes from another source. A source outside our power.

The people object. They know Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph. They are right here on earth. How can Jesus claim that he is bread from heaven? And yet Jesus continues to do so. And he says that no one can know him unless the Father leads them, teaches them and reveals Jesus to them.

Ravi Zacharias, a Canadian-American originally from India, is a popular and respected evangelist. He writes, in his book entitled, Jesus Among Other Gods:

“The Jesus I know and love today I encountered at the age of seventeen. But His name and His tug in my life mean infinitely more now than they did when I first surrendered my life to Him. I came to Him because I did not know which way to turn. I came to Him longing for something I did not have. I remain with Him because I have something I will not trade. I came to Him as a stranger. I remain with Him in the most intimate of friendships. I came to Him unsure about the future. I remain with Him certain about my destiny. I came amid the thunderous cries of a culture that has three hundred and thirty million deities. I remain with Him

knowing that truth cannot be all-inclusive. **Truth by definition excludes** (*emphasis added*).

“You hear it a thousand times and more growing up in the East – ‘We all come through different routes and end up in the same place.’ But I say to you, God is not a place or an experience or a feeling.”

God is real. God comes down from heaven as bread, as nourishment for our hungry hearts. God, in the form of Jesus, comes to us in our deep need. And we remain uncertain. How can we know who Jesus is? How can we trust that He is who He says He is?

### **III. How Can We Know Who Jesus Is?**

This knowledge is, in the final analysis, a gift from God. It is out of our hands. We can only know Jesus through the grace of God.

In other words, God decides. God leads us to Jesus, if He so chooses. God teaches us about Jesus, if and when He decides to do so. God reveals Jesus to us when He decides the timing is right.

Jesus compares himself to bread, an everyday source of nourishment. When Jesus says that God’s revelations about Him come down from heaven, He is not describing otherworldly, ethereal spirituality. Willimon says it this way: “He may be ‘from heaven’ but he is also that which has ‘come down.’ He is the Word, the eternal Word, ‘made flesh.’”

We want our gods to be spiritual, high and lifted up, above this earthly mess that we are in. Jesus makes us uncomfortable. He comes down to live among us, God-in-the-flesh, and says, “I am your bread. Feed on me.”

God draws us to Himself. We bear witness to the abundance we have experienced: Christ is the living bread; we hunger no more. Christ is a life-giving stream; we thirst no more. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We can, as Sparks asserts,

joyfully speak “God’s truth about salvation to a world of relativistic naivete and shallow interfaith hypocrisy.”

### **Closing.**

We are desperately hungry. We are parched with thirst. As a culture we frantically search for spiritual food; our need is great. It is like a gnawing hunger at the core of our being. We are afraid we will never find the food we need. And if we think we’ve found it in some pop spirituality, we fear we will lose it and be hungry once again.

What if we let go of our fears? What if we simply trusted Jesus, believing what He says about Himself? What if He truly is the way, the truth and the life? The bread from heaven? The source of living water?

He is manna, He is bread in the wilderness. He is the rock that breaks open, from which springs of living water flow. He is the water, bursting forth from the rock. As God provided bread and water for the Hebrew children in the desert, so He provides for us through Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you believe this truth, live it. Share it with others. Tell everyone you meet about the abundant life you have in Jesus. Pray for boldness.

If you do not yet believe, trust that God will bring you to belief in His own good time. Ask God to help you in your unbelief.

Martin Luther once said to his congregation, “I wish I could get you to pray the way that my dog goes after meat.”

Pray ravenously for the Bread from heaven, that you may hunger no more.

Amen.