

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**September 4, 2022**  
**John 6:22–35**  
**“I Am” Sermon Series**

Let us pray for the presence of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Loving God, you have so made us that we cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. Give us a hunger for your Word, and in that food, satisfy our daily need, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<sup>22</sup> The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not gotten into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. <sup>23</sup> Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. <sup>24</sup> So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

<sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” <sup>30</sup> So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What

work are you performing? <sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” <sup>32</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” <sup>34</sup> They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

I am not made for the Atkins diet, the low-carb, or no-carb diet. Not the Atkins diet, or any other so-called diet that would mean that I must give up bread. There is nothing quite like the wonderful taste of bread.

Whether it’s a homemade slice of warm bread not too long out of the oven with a spread of butter that is melted to perfection, or the piece of crusty bread spread with some tapenade or bruschetta, or perhaps a small wedge of brie cheese with a small slice of granny smith apple. Or maybe it’s the smell and taste of the spice of a piece of pumpkin bread or banana bread in the fall. Or that little bit of French bread to sop up the last of the soup at the bottom of the bowl. Or it could be the fresh made tortilla that is still warm that you can either dip in some queso or salsa, or maybe even cover in butter and cinnamon sugar. Or maybe, just maybe it’s that piece taken from a larger loaf that you place in your hands as you hear the words, “This is Christ’s body for you.” There is nothing like an excellent piece of bread. It’s no wonder that Jesus says to those who are following him, “I am the bread of life.”

The day before the declaration by Jesus that he is the bread of life, he has been on the hillside preaching, teaching, and healing. A great crowd has gathered, and dinner time is near. Jesus’s disciples ask Jesus to tell the crowd to go back to the city so that they can get food, to which Jesus

responds, “You feed them.” The disciples respond that it is impossible to feed the masses. Jesus’ response is to feed the thousands with a meager supply of loaves and fish, so that all that are gathered have enough to eat.

The next day, the crowds are looking for Jesus for more food, and get in boats to cross the sea to find him. When the multitudes arrive again Jesus tells them to not spend so much energy on filling their bellies, but rather to search after eternal food.

Some take this teaching and focus solely on the spiritual aspect. They take it to mean that the most important aspect of the church is to focus on the eternal things, that the primary task of the church is to save as many souls as possible, to get people to believe in Jesus so that they will make it to heaven. Or possibly even that Jesus’s words are an admonishment that we should concentrate on our own spiritual growth and that we make sure that we are feeding ourselves with the good things of heaven so that we grow in our spiritual maturity.

I believe, however, if you limit this story to a spiritual only teaching, you miss the wider aspects of Jesus’ ministry. The discourse on the bread of heaven is within the context of Jesus actually feeding the multitudes and meeting their physical hunger. You cannot separate the two from one another, they are both important. You must feed body and soul.

There is a quote attributed to Billie Holiday that I love. She was reported to have said, “You've got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for any... body's sermon on how to behave.” It’s another way of saying that we need nourishment for the body and soul. And, in some sense, we can’t focus on the soul part if the body isn’t taken care of.

Jesus, as he often does, is upping the level of commitment. Again, the people were fed by Jesus when there didn't seem to be enough to go around. But instead of not enough, there was plenty. More than plenty. There were leftovers. And yet, the next day, they come wanting more. Think, the day after Thanksgiving. You have eaten your fill the previous day, and then some. And the fridge is still full with the leftovers of the feast. And yet, the people want more and more of what they already have.

Jesus fed the people the day before, and now they come looking for more. And maybe they are just looking for another meal, but maybe they are also looking for something more. Yes, a basic meal is essential but that's not the only thing we need. Billie Holiday said that we need something to eat and a little love. After someone's basic needs are met – food, shelter, clothing – there is also the need for love, for community, hope, and purpose. We hunger not only for food, but we also hunger for love, community, and connection. We hunger for Jesus as the bread of life. Interestingly, all four gospels tell of the feeding of the multitudes, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all conclude the story by saying after the crowds ate, they were satisfied. In the gospel of John, it says they were full. I think there is a difference between being full and satisfied. You may have a full stomach, but if you don't have love, if you don't have connection, if you don't have community, are you satisfied? We hunger for something deeper.

In the Gospel of John, life can mean both things, it can be the physical body, the brain, lungs, feet, hands. And it can also be true life, that which is eternal life. And it isn't just about how to get to heaven. Eternal life is what it looks like when you are in relationship to the God that knows you and made you. Life is also a relationship. Jesus ups the ante. There is the food that feeds the body, that keeps it alive, but you can be alive and not be alive.

After Jesus tells the crowds that they must strive for the food that does not perish, they ask Jesus what they must do to have that food, what must they do to perform the works of God? Jesus answers by saying they must believe in the one who was sent. But what does that look like?

In the Greek the word that Jesus uses that is translated as “believe” is meant more to *act* in trust, commitment, or loyalty. When the Reformer, Martin Luther translated this passage in German, he used a word that was closer to treasure, or hold dear. The root of the word he used was love. So instead of believing certain things, Jesus in some sense is saying we should love.

This understanding is the whole of Jesus’s ministry as expressed in what he answers in another story when the young man asks him the most important commandment. The core of Jesus’s ministry is captured in the Great Commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Recently in our house, one of my kids asked me, “Do you love me?” And I quickly responded, “Yes.” And an equally quick response of “prove it!” came back at me. We just so happen to be about to sit down for dinner, and I had made one of their favorite things, so I just pointed to the table. My child looked at the favorite food, smiled, and admitted that was good evidence of my love. I then, feeling very confident, began to enumerate a multitude of things that I had done to demonstrate my love. Now, to be fair, my child was joking around, but I think we all have moments when we want tangible proof of love.

I only read a few verses of a much longer conversation that Jesus has where he discusses the meaning of calling himself the bread of life. Later in the passage Jesus says something that was truly outrageous and shocking. Jesus later says, in verses 51 through 56

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. The religious leaders then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Now, perhaps that does sound so shocking to us, it is even maybe familiar language to some extent. It is language similar to what we will hear later in worship as we prepare and partake in the meal around this table, as we share communion with one another. But to those hearing it from Jesus, well it was offensive.

The religious leaders are puzzled. Later his disciples say this teaching is difficult, wondering aloud how any can follow it. Some people who had been with Jesus leave when he says this. It’s so shocking because if you are a faithful Jew, you would never ever eat or drink blood. There is explicit prohibition again and again about blood in Jewish law. Blood is life. Blood is what belongs to God. When an animal was sacrificed, the blood was offered only to God. It is life itself.

And, although many of us may not be offended or ready to walk out the door, maybe this talk about blood makes us a little uncomfortable. And it should to some extent because it is still scandalous and confusing. The offense that the people felt, the uncomfortable something some of us may feel, is because Jesus is pointing to his own crucifixion.

The crucifixion is the paradoxical scandal of the faith. This thing that is brutal somehow is also promise. This is God's prove it moment. How is life given, in Jesus' own flesh. Through death and crucifixion. It is offensive, it doesn't make sense. But we are given the thesis statement earlier in the Gospel of John, "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

It is a promise and a relationship, God's love is given, God's love is demonstrated by how far God is willing to go to show us that love. Love, for God, takes the form of self-giving. God's whole life and whole self in Jesus. It's as if God looks at the world, and asks, "What would it take for me to get through to the world that I love them so much?" It takes God's very life. The crucifixion for John is an act of life. It is the consummate act of love. Jesus' self-giving becomes the source of life for us. The length to which God will go to convey God's love for us is breathtaking. How do you know love? We show love by what we are willing to love and give. What more could God give, other than God's whole self. Life without love is not true life for John's gospel.

Love is expressed in visible action and tangible things. We experience the love of God, not just in our head, but in our bodies as well. John takes the body, the flesh and blood human body very seriously. And not just Jesus' body, but ours as well. This is the God of incarnation, God in the flesh. If we are to experience God, it is in and with our bodies.

"We experience God in the flesh. Our flesh is invigorated by the Spirit. Jesus, God, and the Spirit indwell us; we participate in them in our actual bodies. The mystics know this fully; the rest of us catch glimpses

from time to time and it's enough to remind us of eternity in a way that brings us back fully to being present to the present.”<sup>i</sup>

In a few moments we will have opportunity to enact in our worship a love that is embodied. We will share a meal that helps us remember the extent of God's love. This meal around this table, or in our homes, that we celebrate together, reminds us that we are a people in relationship. That we are part of a community, and part of the Body of Christ. A community of life. As you partake in the meal, may you remember Jesus as the bread of life, a life given for abundant life. May it be a meal that is both filling and satisfying. May it nurture us so that we may, in turn, nurture others. In this meal, may we taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jaime Clark-Sales, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/bread-of-life/commentary-on-john-635-59-2>