



THE BREAD OF LIFE
John 6:25-35
Isaiah 55:1-3

Our Old Testament lesson for today from **Isaiah 55:1-3**, shares profound insights which have echoed down the corridors of time, "**Why spend money on what is not bread - and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good.**"¹

When I was a youngster my mother and I had interesting discussions on what was good to eat. It is like the boy who asked the great preacher Dr. Fosdick "**why are the vitamins in the spinach - and not in the ice cream?**" I am thankful that my parents taught me not only the importance of what goes in the stomach - but also what we should allow to go in our soul as well. It is easy to allow humanistic words and ideas to become more important than the divine. The world offers ice cream - but we need spinach.

We are pressured and seduced by sophisticated, well-thought-out ads that appeal to our self-centered nature and appetites. They create in us a desire to want what we really do not need. They seek to fulfill with material goods what only God can fill.

There are two obvious tensions that I find in our lesson for today that I want us to think and reflect on as we prepare to go to the Holy Table.

FIRST there is bread with a small 'b' and Bread with a capital 'B.'

SECONDLY there is work with a small 'w' and Work with a capital 'W.'

Bread is a good word. Bread is a word we use a lot around the church house. Bread is so important to life. In the Ritz household, on the refrigerator, we have a memo pad with a pencil where the list for groceries is compiled as we run out of them. I am sure that at the top of every list in every household today is the word "**bread.**"

It is a universal food and need for our bodies. You can go around the world and some sort of bread is found in every culture or country I have been fortunate enough to visit.

We have Italian bread, New York rye, Matzo crackers, scones, shortbread, whole wheat, English muffins, Greek pastries, Amish whoopee pies and that is why I am on Weight Watchers.

Even in years past, prisoners in jails were entitled to at least **bread and water**. Jesus knew the needs of the human body. Remember, he hungered and thirsted in the wilderness. He grew up in a Jewish home where I am sure his mother Mary - as part of her daily routine and

responsibilities - made bread. He used bread in the Passover meal. He fed 5,000 people because he had compassion on them. He would not permit them to go home hungry. In a family the one who brings home the most money is called the bread winner. When we take a job, we ask ourselves this question, "Can I put bread on the table for my family?" The word bread has so many meanings and emotions attached to it.

Immediately after fighting had stopped in World War II - the American soldiers gathered up many hungry and homeless children and placed them in tent cities. Many of them were malnourished and in need of medical care. **The soldiers shared their bread with them.** However, the soldiers noticed the children were afraid to go to sleep at night. One of the soldiers tried an experiment after dinner - he gave the children a piece of bread to hold. The result was astounding. When they **had the security of bread** for tomorrow they slept like babies. It took away fear.² It still does!

Bread! There is a surplus of meaning in this word. The word evokes strong emotions like security, fellowship, the presence of God, provisions for the journey.

Bread is deemed holy by peoples everywhere, and the root word for bread in most languages can be translated "food," as it is in the Bible.

Yes, people invest the word bread with special meaning and **with religious significance.** For the Jews, bread was a symbol of the Torah, the Law and God's covenant with the people.³ The word bread has so many levels of meaning for the human soul and spirit.

Abraham Maslow developed a theory that he called a hierarchy of achievement needs.

What he said in essence was that the physiological - **the physical need** - of the human body is one of the most powerful drives of man. And unless this need is satisfied, many will not search in earnest for satisfaction of his higher needs. **Jesus realized this.** Each year Ray and our youth group do a wonderful thing when they collect food items for the local pantry to help people here in the New Holland area. Bread. Many of our Sunday School classes have made a special monetary donation to the food bank this year because of increased need.

However, we know that there is a deeper hunger to be met and satisfied. There is **bread (with a small b)** - and then there is **Bread** (with a capital B).

Two weeks ago, Pastor Ray spoke of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Yes, what a marvelous, mind-boggling miracle it was! Five thousand men - not counting women and children - were fed from a small lunch. All four gospels record that miracle. What an impression it left, and the biblical text says that the bread was multiplied in Jesus' hands. The crowd went crazy and wanted to name Jesus king. Gratefully, He refused, and retreated to be alone with His disciples. We can't dictate to him the terms of his office and kingdom. We can only surrender to them.⁴

Guess how the people responded? When Jesus began to talk about Bread with a **capital B**, they asked of Jesus "**Can you give us a sign?**"

Jesus had just fed 5,000 people and walked across water and they wanted a sign. Talk about being locked into the temporal dimension of life and not being able to see the large picture.

That is why this story can be set squarely in the midst of our modern world. Not one thing has changed! We modern people love the spectacular and get bored with the ordinary.

Gratefully, Jesus does care for the people and all of their needs. The disciples wanted to send the people away. Jesus sees the immediate needs of their stomachs - and uses it as a way to reach the deeper hunger. Social action and evangelism go hand-in-hand.

Perhaps some of you remember the famous line that came from the lips of Marie Antoinette. It was during the French Revolution, when the common people were crying out for help and bread in front of the palace that Queen Marie Antoinette lived in. She said in an indifferent voice "**Let them eat cake.**" However, Jesus lays aside royalty - his divinity - he becomes a servant in order to meet the needs of his subjects. Jesus is a different kind of king. So with loving compassion he provides bread for the crowd. This is exactly what the St. Andrews Potato Project and organization does. This is exactly what UMCOR does.

In **verse 25** we see when the folks get to the other side - after they had been lovingly cared for - Jesus moves the question to a deeper level and need. Notice that he says there are two kinds of bread in the world: that which lasts and that which does not. It is far better, he concludes, to work for the bread that endures. But the problem with most of us is that we are working for the kind that doesn't last - mere bread, bread that's temporary. It is easier. We prefer ice cream to spinach.

Jesus did instruct us and gave us his authority to pray "**Give us this day our daily bread.**" Jesus starts with the need of bread. However, he does not stop there. Our bread is God and his will and purpose for life.

Jesus intended the symbol and substance of earthly bread to **direct us to the spiritual** - and the deeper hunger for meaning, purpose and fulfillment. Carl Jung, one of our century's greatest psychiatrists, has said that the central neurosis of our age is emptiness. Mankind's problem is a spiritual problem.

In this story, we see the answer Jesus gives to that need. Yes, there is a need for bread that keeps us alive. There also is a need for bread that gives us a reason to live.

Jesus is trying to help them understand that everyone **has a need for living Bread**. They are like people sitting at a great feast and are famished because they are not taking advantage of the spiritual food that is before them. Jesus is trying to broaden their vision.

There's a hunger and a thirst that only God can fill. Every single person has that hunger. There is an empty place within your life and heart that only God can fill.

You may not know what to call it. At times we try to suppress this longing. You just know that something is missing. Yes, life is more than a full plate. Jesus came to lead us to discover a full life as well.

So Jesus, in our lesson today, provides more than a meal. He knows that he must meet and satisfy the hunger beneath all the hungers of life.

Without that - all the manna in the world can't produce anything but a grumbling spirit. The struggle to discern what is significant and what is superficial is a constant struggle in every generation. Jesus knows we need bread from a new Adam. Jesus knows we need a re-birth. Jesus knows we need a bread that frees us up to love God.

So, from Jesus we learned an important insight. In **John 4:34** Jesus tells his disciples **"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."**⁵ This is where the satisfaction and staying power comes from. The only work I know which can satisfy this inward hunger - is the mission of building God's kingdom revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This is work with a capital **"W"**.

Yes, we can work for trivial pursuits or Eternal ends. We can labor for that which passes away – or for that which will last forever. It is not a question of whether we work or not – the question is “Who will we work for?”⁶

We see this tension lived out in almost all the characters we find in John's gospel from Nicodemus to Pilate and the disciples themselves.

Nicodemus, for example, was prominent – privileged – positioned powerfully in the social and religious fabric of that community. Yet he comes to Jesus at night because his heart and soul ached and longed for something more. He wanted more than signs and security and the status quo. He wanted a life that was connected to the eternal. He had longings and appetites that bread with a small ‘b’ and work with a small ‘w’ could not meet and satisfy. So chapters later he surrenders all to the Master and his kingdom.

Maya Angelou, the poetess from Arkansas, expresses this so well:

**“Lying last night thinking,
How I could find myself a home,
Where the water is not thirsty
and the bread loaf is not stone.**

**I came up with one thing
and I don't believe I am wrong,
that nobody, I mean nobody
can make it all alone.”**

At this table today God gives us living bread - that we can be a different people - because we eat **a different kind of bread**. The living bread - for a people - who will eternally live with Him. A bread that is worthy to consume my Soul - my life - my all. So today we partake of the bread and the cup and a whole lot more. It is bread with a capital **B**. We are invited to participate in his kingdom, which is work with a capital **‘W.’**

Only this bread will give me the security to work by day and sleep by night and to know that life has meaning beyond the morning headlines. If the saying is true, “We are what we eat” – then there is no finer **bread for the world** than that which is in front of us today.

Let us go to the Holy Table.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

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1. NIV, Isaiah 55:2.
 2. This story is attributed to the late Dr. Charlie Allen of Houston, Texas.
 3. Thanks to Donald J. Shelby.
 - ⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1648.
 5. NIV, John 4:34.
 - ⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, CA, 1993, September 4th devotional.