

“What You Do To Survive”

(John 6.27-38, 47-52)

A sermon preached by Dave Shull
Broadview Community United Church of Christ
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I am grateful for the chance to be with you this morning - to attend the 8:45 adult education class on Annie Dillard, and to worship with you. And to have the opportunity to lead worship with Dan. Our planets have occupied similar orbits for quite some time. We met when we were both living in Chicago. My father's family were all in the Church of the Brethren, and when Dan's brother Mike led music for University Congregational UCC's annual summer camp, we discovered there were many Brethrens we knew in common. When I was in Portland last weekend visiting my second cousin and his fiancée, my cousin Nate said, "There's this UCC church in north Seattle where this neat pastor works . . ." Nate had met Dan and Sam while visiting his good friend who is the pastor of the Church of the Brethren here in Seattle. And then to be able to work on the bulletin this week with my friend Mary MacKenzie, whose father was my colleague at University Church for ten years! And, on top of these intersecting lives, I see familiar faces here.

And so I am reminded that even in challenging times there is much to be grateful for. And so I sing with the psalmist, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, for You are Our Rock and our Redeemer (Psalm 19.14).

Every summer, members of University Congregational United Church of Christ spend a week at the Seabeck Christian Conference Center on the Hood Canal. It's a marvelous gathering of people between nine months and 90 years of age. The camp ends with a worship service that celebrates the theme for the week. And we always have communion. The Bread of Life for you. The Cup of Blessing for you. Everyone coming together as one, now friends with people whose names they hadn't known just five days earlier.

Several years ago, as we were cleaning up after the end-of-camp worship service, a 7-year-old boy came up to the communion table and asked, 'Are there seconds on the Bread of Life?'

I don't know about you, but the past couple of weeks I feel like I've needed seconds on the Bread of Life. It seems like something is terribly terribly wrong in our world. And I haven't known how to respond. And I still don't.

And so this Word from God comes to us today.

*I am the Bread of Life
All who eat this bread will never die
I am God's love revealed
I am broken that you might be healed.*

This Word from God comes to us today, two days after the United Nations Security Council approved a ceasefire for the war in Lebanon, and one day after the Israeli army deliberately bombed a group of refugees and unarmed Lebanese soldiers who were being escorted to safety by United Nations officials.

This Word from God comes to us today, three days after newspaper headlines around the world detailed an alleged plot to blow up up to ten jumbo jets over the Atlantic Ocean.

This Word from God comes to us today four days after a United Nations report said the humanitarian situation in the Sudan has actually worsened since a May 5 peace treaty was signed in an effort to stop a war that in just three years has claimed 200,000 lives and produced 2 million refugees.

This Word of God comes to us just two weeks after my good friend was attacked and severely beaten by three men a half-block from his north Seattle home, and two days after he underwent surgery to repair multiple facial fractures.

*I am the Bread of Life
All who eat this bread will never die.*

What can such a word mean in a world in which 20,000 children die each day from illnesses that could be prevented with adequate food and drinking water?

What can such a word mean in a world that hungers and thirsts for a wise compassion to guide the actions of the world's only superpower? And in a world where so many hunger for healing and hope, for justice and joy, for companionship and meaning?

For the people who first heard Jesus' words 2000 years ago, this word called them to an almost unbearably radical trust. The Jews listening to Jesus had seen his miracle when he fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. And they had hunted him down to get more of that same bread. They told Jesus, "You're exactly like our prophet Moses. Moses fed our ancestors in the wilderness with bread from heaven, just like you say you're doing." And the Hebrew scriptures often describe the laws which reflected God's special relationship with the Jewish people as 'bread' (Proverbs 9.5). To the ears of first-century Jews, it sounded like Jesus had come to offer them bread like the bread Moses gave and like the bread of the law which shaped their faithful living.

But Jesus says no. Jesus says, God gave your ancestors that bread in the wilderness. It wasn't Moses' doing. And you know what? Maybe that bread from heaven kept your ancestors from dying of starvation in the wilderness. But they still died. That bread could not keep them alive forever. And neither can the bread of religious laws.

But, Jesus said, my bread does. Because I'm not giving you anything made by human hands that eventually is digested or gets moldy or dries up and blows away.

To these first-century Jews, and to us today, Jesus says, I'm giving you myself.

And I am God's love revealed. I am God's love put in a flesh-and-blood body. And I'm not here for anybody but you. I love you.

Do you hear me? I said I love you.

And I want you to let me into *you* and *your life* so I can draw you into *me* and *my life*. And once that happens nothing can part us. We shall be together forever.

Because I am God's love revealed. And God's love will never die. Once you accept my offer of love, once you make yourselves at home in my love (Eugene Peterson translation of John 15.4, *The Message*), nothing can separate us (Romans 8.39).

And the headlines of this week, instead of making a mockery of the Life Jesus offers, draw me to Jesus' side more powerfully than ever.

A year I spent living in India when I was nine years old led me later to reject God. Seeing kids my age literally dying in the streets convinced me God was either cruel or apathetic. Neither kind of God was anyone I wanted anything to do with. Later life events led me back to God. But I hadn't heard a really compelling resolution to the tension between the reality of suffering and the reality of a loving, powerful God until just two years ago. I was doing a dialogue sermon with a member of University Church who is from Kenya, and who is devoting a great deal of time and energy to helping those in her village who are orphaned because of HIV and AIDS. When we were preparing our sermon, I asked her how seeing so much devastation and death from this illness had affected the faith of the people in her village. She replied, "I think all of the talk of suffering being proof that God doesn't exist or doesn't care is a Western problem. No one I know in my village believes God promised them they wouldn't suffer. What we believe is God promised never to abandon us to suffer alone."

And so Jesus comes to us in these hellacious days when it is clear there is something terribly terribly wrong with our world.

And he doesn't give us a profound theological doctrine.

He doesn't give us a tidy sound-byte.

He doesn't give us a bumper sticker.

He doesn't give us a self-help guide.

He doesn't give us a 15-minute workout regimen that we can do without interrupting our other commitments.

Into this world where we worship violence, consumption, and fear, Jesus comes and gives us himself.

And he says, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 6.44). You cannot serve God and money (Luke 16.13). Forgive seventy-seven times (Matthew 18.22).

Into this world where we worship busyness and raise children who are over-committed and over-competitive and over-stimulated, Jesus comes and gives us himself.

And he says, don't be anxious (Matthew 6.25). He says the last shall be first and the first shall be last (Matthew 20.16). He says take time to just to look at lilies growing in a field (Matthew 6.28).

Into this sanctuary, Jesus comes. One who many in our world and many in the church today would look upon as a pathetic loser. No money. No houses or boats or cars. No Ivy League diplomas. No army. No tough talk. No overflowing pews. No church expansion projects.

And he offers us himself.

I am the Bread of Life

All who eat this bread will never die

I am God's love revealed

I am broken that you might be healed.

And I want that Bread.

I want to make my home in that love.

I want a different God than the violent, fearful, hyper-competitive, money-worshiping god our society calls me to bow down to.

I want the Bread of Life.

Which means giving myself over to the broken love of this Jesus. Giving myself as a healer of some broken part of creation. Giving myself as a member of a faith community that has tasted this Bread and knows it to be the only food worth doing anything for.

I want the Bread of Life.

It was, I believe, because I had accepted Jesus' invitation to make myself at-home in his love that I ended up feeling called-out of my ministry at University Congregational United Church of Christ this past year. I cannot imagine a better congregation to have worked with and been a part of for the 11.5 years my partner Peter and I served there together. At the same time, I knew Jesus was calling me out into something new.

Even though I had no idea what Jesus was calling me to enter, I knew he was calling me out. And even though it felt foolish and scary and irresponsible to give up something without anything to take its place, I stepped out of that boat. I spent three months studying Spanish in Guatemala. And then I returned to Seattle at the end of May.

And I have been trying to listen for Jesus' call. Trying from this place of being at-home in his love to listen for where the One who is God's love revealed wants me to walk. And what I'm finding myself drawn to these days is to help create what I can only describe as a non-celibate monastic community. I feel called to help create a place where Christians who want to go deeper in their faith, deeper in their relationships with one another, and deeper into their calling as healers of this world. Men and women, single people, partnered-people, parents and children. A community that has taken in the Bread of Life and been drawn back into the broken and beautiful life of Jesus. And I dream such an inclusive monastic community could be part of the United Church of Christ, both accountable to our denomination and a witness to it of a different way to be disciples of the One who is Bread, Light, Way, Truth, and Life for the world. I am excited and very nervous and scared about this call. I'm beginning a process of asking wise people who know me well what they hear as I describe the dream, and whether they believe it is a call from Jesus or from somewhere or someone else. I pray for the patience and the wisdom and the trust to walk whatever road Jesus leads me down, whether it is toward this kind of a community or to some other place and work.

Because more than anything, I want to walk where Jesus is walking. Because where so many leaders in our world are trying to take us is on paths that are evil, and cruel, and death-dealing.

The songwriter Bruce Springsteen, whom I believe is one of our boldest prophets today, has written a song about being a U.S. soldier in the Iraq war. ("Devils and Dust," from the CD by the same title, 2005, Columbia Records/Sony BMG Music Entertainment). It is the most powerful contemporary anti-war song I know. The refrain goes like this:

*I got God on my side
I'm just trying to survive
What if what you do to survive
Kills the things you love?
Fear's a dangerous thing,
It can turn your heart black you can trust,
It'll take your God-filled soul,
And fill it with devils and dust.*

It seems like much in the world is offering us a savior who makes us kill the things we love in order to survive. Things like just peace, diplomacy, civil rights, protection of the earth, support for loving commitments, sacrificial love. It seems like much in the world is offering us a savior whose bread is a Bread of Fear, a Bread of Anxiety, a Bread of Eye for an Eye. And in spite of the God-filled language of this savior, we look into our souls and do not see God's love revealed, but only devils and dust.

The One who is Bread comes to us. He knows we're trying to survive in the midst of much that is broken and confusing. And he knows that as people, as churches, as a nation, what we do in the name of survival often goes against what we say we believe. In order to survive, we kill what we love. And we're told that's the way it is. That's the real world.

And still the Bread of Life comes to us. And offers all that he has to offer. His very self, his broken love, the God he makes flesh who is so in love with the world She has come to dwell with us and has become one of us. Bread of Life comes to us, and asks us to receive him. And walk the roads of this life with him by our side. And dwell for eternity in the arms that will never let us go. Amen.