

“The Bread of Life” / John 6:24-35 / 5 August 2012

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus tells the famished crowds. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Now let me ask you: What could he possibly mean by *that*? I mean, Jesus and I are on pretty good terms. I like to think that I both “come to him” and “believe in him,” but my life—like yours—is still punctuated with hungers, and thirsts, and the deep, deep yearnings of the soul. I still long for things that I can never have, don’t you? How does Jesus satisfy our desires?

Back when we lived in a “manse,” I kept all my tools in a cardboard shoebox. (A “manse” is Presbyterian jargon for a rectory or parsonage.) Why did I need tools when the church owned the house I lived in, and there was a committee to do all the repairs? If the furnace went out, or the dishwasher stopped running, I simply called the Building and Grounds Committee. And, in true committee fashion, I could expect results in four to six weeks. Nowadays, I have enough tools to clutter a two-stall garage. I’ve also become acquainted with Lowe’s and Home Depot.

Recently, I stood in the plumbing department of one of those stores and waited to talk to the plumbing-answer-man. He was a short, plump little guy in his fifties. To me he looked exactly like the kind of chap who might know a thing or two about plumbing, which was comforting because I had some questions for him. But unfortunately for me, he happened to be helping a woman of astonishing beauty. She was one of those women you typically only see on TV. (I looked around for the camera, but there was none.) And he talked about pop-up plugs, and chrome drains versus plastic drains, and the best kind of wrench to use. The man laughed, and went on importantly about plumber’s putty, and something he called “joint dope,” and this urgent detail and that. He was taking far more time with this customer than was necessary. And though I was running out of patience, I knew exactly what was happening: He held the undivided attention of a remarkably beautiful woman. He had an opportunity to be her hero, of sorts. And so, I finally gave up on him. I chose the doohickey that seemed best to me and proceeded to the checkout counter. When I came slinking back to the store an hour later, it was to return the hardware I had just purchased. This time I did get an opportunity to ask the guy for some plumbing advice. He showed me the right part, which was more of an apparatus than a doohickey. I took it home, and it snapped into place beautifully.

But when the plumbing-answer-man was sorting through the racks to find the item I needed, I found myself wondering what it would look like to tell him just how much he had inconvenienced me that day. “You know, I bought the wrong part earlier today because you were too busy flirting with a customer. I drove all the way home with it, tried to install it, and had to come back.” Of course, I didn’t say anything because it would have been awkward and confrontational. But there was another reason: I couldn’t blame the man for enjoying the attention of a lovely woman. There was nothing lewd or sordid about his behavior toward her. If anything, he advised her in an almost fatherly way. She awakened in him a sense of gentlemanliness and protectiveness. He liked being the one she turned to, if only for a moment, if only with questions about her bathroom sink. Who doesn’t long to be needed? Who doesn’t long to be in the presence of beauty? Oh, the yearnings of the soul! Oh, the many longings that drive us!

In our reading today from the Gospel of John, Jesus accuses the crowds of following him in order to get their stomachs filled. Then he says those famous words, “I

am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” What does this mean for our many complex desires?

Well desire is funny thing. There are the things we want, and we know we want them. There are the things we want without really knowing it. And there are the things we very much did not want, but end up getting and loving anyway. There’s so much that we want, so much that we yearn for, so much that we pursue. There’s so much that we ask God for. We spend the best years of our lives laboring toward our goals. We’ve got a constant hunger for more. How is Jesus the bread of life—the fulfillment of our life’s deepest desires?

Bread has been the ancient “staff of life” for many human cultures down through the ages. It’s come a long way since I was a kid in the 1970s, and your choices were pretty much limited to “Town Talk” or “Schwebels.” Back in those days, whole wheat and rye were still considered kind of exotic. And pumpnickel—like the cream cheese that accompanied it—only appeared on special occasions. There was nothing gluten free, and no bakery specialties with French and Italian names, nothing you would dip in olive oil and vinegar. And yet, as flavorless and as unnourishing as it was, that old sliced white bread appeared at every meal in many homes. The word “bread” is symbolic. It means anything that sustains life—whether money or food. And so, in this reading from John, Jesus is claiming to be a basic component for living, a basis for seeing the world, a way of life. I am the bread of life: I’m something that should be so much a part of your character that you can almost take it for granted. My principles should be on every table.

But if Jesus is the bread—the essential component of life—then what’s life? It seems like a silly question, but really, what is life? I mean, if by “life” we mean something that has a metabolism, something that grows, and adapts, and reproduces, and dies, then you could make an argument that fire is alive. My favorite novelist, James Salter, once said, “Life is meals.” I’d sooner say that life is emails. Life is tasks. It’s committee meetings, and coffee, and yard work. For many of us, life is a breathless state of catching up. Some duties are rewarding, and some are tedious. Life is tinged by emotions that we mostly don’t examine or understand: wistfulness or worry that grasp at the outer edges of our happiest moments. But there’s often a sense of well-being, too, a deep contentment, a profound peace, that slips up on us from behind, then goes away as unexpectedly as it came. Life entails sorrows—old, old regrets—and some anxieties about the future for our loved ones, for our world. There’s sadness, and togetherness, and hope. Some of us feel like disappointments to our spouses, our children, our employers. Life is desires! Everyone lives with unspoken longings. They’re the constant sky above, and it’s punctuated by occasional clouds of real joy. We long for things that we already have. We long for things that we know very well we don’t want. We long for things always did want and never got. I personally long for twenty acres in Vermont, or Upstate New York and a safe world for my kids. It’s just a dream. I can’t maintain the acre I’ve got. It’s unachievable for a variety of reasons, including my rootedness in this region. But life is desires. When we stop experiencing desires, then we probably feel ready to give up on life.

The old song says, “Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts, thou fount of life, thou light of all.” It sounds like hymnal hyperbole until you consider that the words and the ways of Jesus are a posture for living, a perspective on life. And it’s a life so unlike the so-called “Christian” world that we see on TV with their Chick-Fil-A sandwiches and their

political machines. Our lives consist of a bundle of desires, but at the heart of it all, what we most desire is meaning. What we most desire is a clear, consistent, purposeful way to live our lives. God's dream for this world is Jesus' teachings of love and forgiveness. It's a posture that we can adopt.

Ah, the holy hunger that pervades all of life and keeps us searching for something more. That hunger is a good thing. The painful emptiness that remains after all the world's approval fades; it's actually a healthy thing. The vague disappointment that meets our noblest attempts at happiness, the unrelenting restlessness that keeps us looking for some new fix, some new high; it's a good thing. If not for it, we would content ourselves with so much less than we were created for!

"I am the bread of life," Jesus says. His life is a way to live your life. It's a way to conduct yourself in all your worldly affairs. It's a posture for living that reframes all the issues of life according to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" In Germany, during World War II, children in orphanages had difficulty sleeping. They'd been rescued from starvation, but without their parents, they continued to be afraid of what the next day might bring. Someone finally suggested that each child be given a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. And so, every night before bed, each child was given the piece of bread that he or she would eat for the next day's breakfast. Somehow, this comforted the children and they were able to fall asleep. Having just a little piece of tomorrow's food in their hand helped them to believe that there would be a tomorrow for them, and it brought them comfort in the throes of war. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says. "I am the fulfillment that you desire. Fashion your lives around the things that I say, the deeds that I do." What would this bread of life mean for you?