

**Love Beyond Loaves**  
**A Sermon for Millbrook Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, 8/11/2024**  
**John 6:35, 41-51**



### **John 6:35, 41-51**

6:35 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.

6:41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

6:42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

6:43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves.

6:44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise that person up on the last day.

6:45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.

6:46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

6:47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

6:48 I am the bread of life.

6:49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.

6:50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

6:51 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."



I want to begin by focusing on the first verse of today's pericope:

“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.’” (John 6:35, NRSV).

Some context: Jesus knows his audience is familiar with the manna of the Exodus story. Jesus wants to provoke listeners into considering an even greater source of life.

God gives daily bread, manna, to the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness. Don't me wrong, this is a remarkable gift. We need our daily bread and our daily watering to exist. And each week, this is a specific petition we offer collectively to our Creator. Give us something, God, that keeps us alive, allows us to move forward.

Special as it may be, this bread spoils, too. The Israelites cannot store it up and take it with them. This bread will not offer them freedom from their wandering; in many ways their reliance on manna keeps them in the wilderness. But what this bread does help them do (and us, too!) is remember. Manna helps us remember that we are bound to one another, that we need each other to move from the chaos of wilderness and wandering into the stability of home and stillness. Manna helps us to remember God's presence and provisions.

The original Israelites know what it is to be a stranger, to be hungry, to be thirsty, to be captive, to be alone, to be afraid, to be dispirited. They also know of the power, mercy, and love of a God who has been present with them through it all. And the religion that emerges from this struggle emphasizes a behavior and a practiced cult that

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remembers what it is to be vulnerable. People covenant to be neighbors; to protect the orphan, and the widow, and the stranger; to practice Jubilee, a sacred rhythm of restoring land and people in every generation. In this way, they offer to one another the same kind of love and presence that God offers to all humanity.

Bread-seeking keeps us alive, but it also keeps us in the wilderness. When we decide to become bread-makers, people who refuse to tolerate systemic vulnerabilities, we find a home, and we find ourselves.

But Israel – that’s the earliest believers right on up to present-day believers – Israel lives in tension. Even though we know about God’s enough-ness, we too often long for Caesar’s consumption. We see the glitz of wealth while ignoring its neglect. We dream about the luxury of banquet, or of extra room, in our car, in our home, on a plane, or of extravagance, and we forget about the damage that such waste leaves in its tracks. In the Exodus story, hoarded bread spoils. In the real world, hoarded bread has a much more dire consequence. It’s not just that the bread spoils, it’s that our desire to take much, much, much, MUCH more than we need, spoils, inhibits, and damages the lives of our neighbors.

Jesus lives next to the extravagance of Herod, who exploits the region of Galilee for its hatcheries. Peasants labor in fields and cast nets for tiny wages, while Herod builds summer palaces. Herod wants people to believe that consumption is the most powerful act of humanity. Jesus knows that generosity is the most powerful act of humanity.



If we believe we must have more than our neighbors to have a sense of value in the world, Herod has already one. Herod tells us it's a zero-sum-gain world, so we need to fall in line, and let him be our provider. Do we really wanna live in a world where Herod's not on our side?

But Jesus points out that Herod can't offer us anything with shelf-life. Sure, Herod can fill our bellies today, and maybe tomorrow, too, but it comes with a cost: subservience.

"Whoever you are," Jesus says, "Come to me, and you'll never be hungry." Yes, Jesus is gonna share his table with us, but he's also going to share his life with us. Jesus is gonna tell us that we matter. Jesus is gonna remind us that the world is better because we're in it. Jesus is gonna remind us that God delights in our presence. None of us, not a one, are gonna hunger for belonging.

"Whoever you are," Jesus says, "Believe in me, and you'll never be thirsty." Yes, Jesus will share his canteen. No, Jesus isn't asking us to take a loyalty oath. Jesus is asking: "Do you recognize God in my presence, and in the presence of other neighbors?" This presence offers the kind of worth, and love, and longevity that we can't find in a water fountain.

Jesus is telling us that a community of collaborative, loving, faithful people, who acknowledge God's presence in their midst, acknowledge God's ability to put their unique gifts to use, and acknowledge a desire to do more than simply consume...this...this...THIS is the kind of place that offers living bread, living water, purposeful life.

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What need have we for manna, Millbrook, if we become living bread? What need would we have of systemic care or food vouchers for our children if we were to treat every child as our own? What need would any of us have for more if all of us had enough?

When we come into the presence of Jesus, especially in one another, and we believe in the presence of Jesus, especially in one another, we are gonna find a substance that fills us, that feeds us, that quenches us, and we will also begin to generate a substance that fills, feeds, and quenches our neighbors, too. It's called beloved community. And if we're doing it right, its boundaries expand ever outward.

I need to pause here. I think it's important to acknowledge that at least for some of us, today's pericope, like much of John's discourses, is tricky to navigate. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." And I love the directness of this statement. And I cling to that word *whoever*, because I hear "somebody, anybody, everybody" has access to this living bread. Jesus, as Jessica so pointedly tells us each Sunday, offers a love that is for everyone. No exceptions or exclusions. Thanks be to God!!!

I've spent the majority of my time focusing on what I believe to be the very inclusive nature of this text, and indeed of the entire gospel. But...the text does, on first appearance, seem to offer a disclaimer to its invitation?

"No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me."  
And in this post, post-modern world, that's a hard thing for us to reconcile. The concept of being chosen, or of being elected smarts of



privilege. And it smarts of a firmness, and a sense of precision that stands in stark contrast to both the mystery and accessibility of God. The God of Jesus is not to be exclusively owned by Christians in the Twenty-First Century any more than the God of Moses was to be exclusively owned by the First-Century Temple establishment.

I share a commonality with the Johannine community. I freely admit that I too have been drawn to God by the source they identify as Father. And I have found sustaining, life-giving bread in this source.

But the Father I have come to know, and know a little better each day, is also SO big, and SO full of grace, and SO full of creativity. This Father is also comfortable being Mother, or Spirit, or a lady full of wisdom, or something unbound to our restrictive labels and ideas. And this being, this source, this Word, this energy, this God is SO far beyond my comprehension, that I will not, I cannot, I shall not believe that anything or anybody can prevent God's desire to be connected to Their creatures and creation. Nor can I believe that the bread Jesus describes is reserved only for those who see God through the lenses of the Johannie Community. Or that such bread is reserved only for those, who in any age, ours included, pervert John's gospel with patriarchal, inaccurate, cherry-picked proof-texts to ensure outdated systems of domination.

Jesus isn't now, nor has Jesus ever been, a merchant who peddles breads and other wares, nor an artisan who charges a 500 percent mark-up at Harris Teeter, nor a bouncer checking credentials at the door. Jesus is the proof of God's accessibility, openness, and creativity. And Jesus offers the kind of bread that's leavened by love. Jesus offers

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love-leavened bread to all who would seek it, and even to those who wouldn't.

Millbrook Baptist Church, it's time for us to be living bread in the world. It's time for us to be beloved community in the world. It's time for us to be the people God is calling us to be. Jesus says it can be so, if only we will come, if only we will believe, if only we will faith God's presence in the world, faith God's confidence in each one of us, and faith the Spirit's ability to transcend our lives and communities.

Friends, may we come to the Holy One, may we believe in the Holy One, and may it be right now.

Amen.