



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

**From the Pulpit...**

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## ***“Bread from Heaven”***

**Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching**

*Exodus 16: 2-7; John 6: 51-58*

*September 2, 2018*

I love the smell of fresh baked bread. When the kids were younger, we cheated a bit with a bread machine that did a lot of the work to appease our desire for fresh hot bread. We would experiment with different flours, adding different herbs and spices, delighting in pulling apart and enjoying the deliciousness.

I know friends of mine who have embraced making bread, almost as a ritual or meditation, allowing the process of stirring, mixing, adding, and waiting, to nourish the spirit - while looking forward to nourishing the body. So on this Communion Sunday I was drawn to consider a text about bread, and there are quite a few available in the Bible.

The reading from John’s gospel on its own though, is a strange text that speaks about bread. Perhaps hard to hear or understand... a bit off putting, when taken literally.

So, first let’s go back to the reading from Exodus, which is an important part of the foundational story for Jews and Christians that speaks of God’ saving and freeing actions. You may recall the story of the Exodus. The Israelites in bondage in Egypt, oppressed under a tyrannical leader, harsh labor and conditions; enslaved. Moses, an Israelite that has been adopted into the ruling family sees the brutality being inflicted, steps in to intercede but ends up murdering one of the Egyptians. In fear of discovery he flees to another country, marries, starts a family, and becomes a shepherd.

Meanwhile, God hears the cry of the Israelites in Egypt and calls Moses out of his self-inflicted exile to lead the people to freedom. Of course, the Pharaoh will not let them go and what happens next becomes the Passover story that is repeated and celebrated every year by the Jewish people.

Much hardship is cast upon the Egyptians, in the way of ten plagues sent by God, but still the Pharaoh will not let the people. Finally, God warns the Israelites that death will come to the homes of the Egyptians - but will “Passover” those of the Israelites and that they should pack quickly and get away. This scene culminates with the Israelites passing through the Red Sea toward freedom while the sea engulfs and ruins Pharaoh’s army.

This is the story of the Passover – God making the way of freedom, the way out of bondage for the people. It is a primary way that we understand God.

But then the Exodus reading this morning picks up with a story of how God continues to provide for their needs, even raining down “bread from heaven.” And yet the people fail to trust God and do not understand what is being given to them. Hmmm, something we struggle with today, but, seeking to understand is a wonderful journey we are all on together!

And so now, let’s re-enter the reading from John where Jesus seems to be speaking in riddles. The Jews in the story are outraged and we might be too if taken at face value. And this lesson has caused a lot of controversy, discussion, and ultimately division in the formation of rituals and understanding about the celebration of The Lord’s Supper.

But please consider, what we hear from Jesus this morning does not take place during that “last supper” in John’s gospel. The focus there is on Jesus washing the disciple’s feet, and speaks of loving and serving each other. What we hear from Jesus this morning draws on the connection between the Passover story - that God makes way to free us from the bondage of hopelessness. And it draws on the relationship of “bread from heaven” and God’s desire that we have what we need; in finite terms like “daily bread” that expands in the wideness of God’s grace, in the living bread from heaven.

I imagine Jesus saying emphatically, “I AM THE LIVING BREAD.”

Here I am, flesh and blood. You are worth it all. You are worth my all. Let me be your all. And the extraordinary thing that Jesus asks, is that we abide in him - because his grace and life abide in us.

And still, we don’t need to be vegetarians to be uncomfortable with Jesus’ words. Something that resonates for me in this teaching is to consider that these words “flesh and blood” draw on layers of meaning in the Old and New Testament. It is used to speak of a kind of kinship relationship, as well as speaking of the “whole” person; the mind, spirit, emotions, thoughts, hopes...everything. Quite beautiful and meaningful - when we think of a “kinship” relationship with God. And the idea that God, in Jesus, offers us all these things; to be well in mind, body, and spirit. But we should not hear this as simply a peaceful platitude, that sits lightly and blows away with the wind of whatever next crosses our mind. To take in God, to be serious about abiding, is meant to be ingested, and digested, and ruminated upon, and will very likely change you- again and again. And that is also why we celebrate communion - again and again, to remind us, encourage us, and inspire us.

I LOVE sharing communion together. It is a time of Holy Solemnity and deep joy that in some mysterious way we show our desire to take Jesus in...

There is something so beautiful about rituals. They teach us in tangible ways- that somehow carry a sense of mystery for us, but rituals also help us reflect on meaning. They invite us to reflect on how these things we do together carry meaning in the way we live? This ritual practice

of Communion helps carry the uncomfortable reminder that we are dependent, we are broken, yet we are more than that. We are flesh and blood of God's creation, we carry light, hope, and grace. We love and are completely, unabashedly loved. We are receivers of living bread. And when the words of institution are spoken, I hope we hear them with our heart. This place, in our celebration of Communion, feels both intense and joyful.

But I want to share with you, that the words we often use for Communion come from 1 Corinthians, a letter written at least 30 years before our reading from John this morning. The Thursday morning Bible study happens to be discussing this letter currently. It is our practice that everyone around the table reads a portion out loud, and then we pause for discussion. The previous week one of the members had their turn and fell upon the Words of Institution. And when they finished reading they said something like "whew- I didn't feel like I should be saying those words!"

It is humbling, and we have heard them so many times before, but they do not feel trite or rote because they lead us into "living bread from heaven."

You may know, I grew up Catholic, and both the way of practice and way of understanding The Lord's Supper, are now different from that which holds my mind, spirit, and heart. But I have sweet memories of the thrill of that First Communion, and in the years following, of walking forward with friends and family to receive.

I have also, many times had the joy of standing in a circle of youth at camp, tearing off a piece of bread, dipping it into a cup as we pass and serve each other. And even when I hear a nervous giggle from some in the circle I am glad, because I know there is a sense of awe in the feeling of not quite understanding what we are doing, but knowing we belong together and that in some tangible and mysterious way, God is somehow with us in that bread and cup.

I have both stood on this chancel, and sat in these pews as the plates are passed, and felt such peace, as a deep sense of communion washes over and through me.

I have also sat and waited in other pews - in other spaces while those around me received, and I did not, because all of us in the room did not believe the same thing.

This is not to argue for a "one way" statement of understanding. Or to offer up this "bread from heaven" in an exclusive way. Nor do I mean to say that a particular ritual or way of celebrating is better than the other. I believe it is within the fullness of the gospel's purpose to encourage us to embrace and live a life that takes in all of Jesus, everything we know and even that which we don't understand - into our heart and into our way of life.

When we are invited to this table, we are invited to a mysterious, mutual relationship when Jesus says that we abide in him and he abides in us. It is an invitation that sounds like the beginning of a song written in the 30's which says, "All of me, why not take all of me." This is God who comes to us in the flesh, offers us everything and asks that we sing the same words back. All of me, why not take all of me.

When we think of Jesus as “living bread from heaven” it is not something of the past, it is not something limited to a moment, singular and able to nourish only a select few. It is living bread, eternal bread that is not “saved” for later but with us now. Let’s take it in together. Amen