



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Metaphor, Memory, and Meaning Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

A few weeks ago in Sunday School, our class discussed the experience of the Thai boys' soccer team that was trapped in a cave and the rescue effort that saved them. I mentioned that the story reminded me of a favorite childhood book which was about five boys who were lost in a cave and their effort to find their way out. Nancy Ellis, librarian detective extraordinaire, took it upon herself to track down a copy through the interlibrary lending service. On Friday, Nancy placed in my hands a copy of *Five Boys in a Cave*.

Holding that green-bound book, exactly like the one I took off the shelf of the Chester County Library fifty years ago, I was my nine year old self again, taking refuge from a hot summer afternoon, losing myself for a few hours in a cave along with five other boys, and loving every moment of it. Memory can be like a switch that turns on the lights of forgotten meaning.

We all know how a picture, a story, an aroma, or a taste can bring back memories in an instant. Jesus did too. For several weeks now, and several more to come, the lectionary readings focus upon the sixth chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus identifies himself as "the Bread of life." When the crowds followed him to a deserted place in order to hear him teach and to be healed, Jesus' disciples urged him to send them home so that they could get food for themselves before it got too late. Jesus refused and told them to feed the people. I do not think that it was simply happenstance that Jesus used a little boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish to spark a memory in the people seated all around him.

Bread invokes a potent memory for Jewish people because it was the manna God provided each morning in the wilderness that sustained the Hebrew people throughout their long journey. Bread carries powerful meaning because it reminds the Jews of God's life giving presence in their lives. Just as God had done centuries before, Jesus took bread, a staple of life, and fed a multitude of people. Surely, some of those people picnicking on the hillside beside the sea made the connection between the grace their ancestors experienced in the wilderness and the grace that was unfolding all around them at that moment.

Jesus took advantage of the linkage of memory to convey who he was and what he was about. After they had eaten their fill and remembered their history, as they were rejoicing in the acts of mercy and healing he was doing for them, Jesus kept explaining 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).

It is a nice metaphor, this image of Jesus as the bread of life. Immediately it hooks everyone present into the meaning of who they are as the people of God. It also taps into their actual physical and spiritual hungers. Those people who were following Jesus all around the Sea of Galilee knew what hunger was like. Maybe it wasn't a persistent problem, but there were certainly times when resources were thin, food was scant, and bellies rumbled from lack of sustenance. John even suggests that some of them followed Jesus primarily because of the food rather than his ability to heal. They understood physical hunger.

There was also a spiritual hunger among the people. Their faith had sustained them for hundreds of years through personal and national challenges in which they were often on the losing side of the equation. With the Roman Empire in control of their land and with religious leaders wearing them down with a form of faith that was anything but life giving, they were weary and frustrated and losing hope after so many years of longing for God to do something for them. They understood spiritual hunger.

Imagine being in a crowd like that and hearing someone say, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Whether you suffered from physical hunger or spiritual thirst, you would pay attention to this man. Jesus knew the deep needs of the people and found a way to hook into them.

We experience this kind of tug on our needs every day. We are constantly promised relief from our physical problems through the wonder of one pill or another. We are told repeatedly that the right clothes or the best jewelry or that particular car will increase our standing in the world. One cruise line urges us to book an excursion by promising that we will "come back new." Not re-newed, but new! I happened upon a radio program the other day and heard an evangelist of sorts offering her "God's Way" elixirs which promise to bring health and healing and even weight loss in no time at all. She even interviewed a woman who claimed to have gone from a size 50 dress to a size 20 in short order and without any change in diet or exercise.

She simply did it “God’s Way” by taking the elixir— for only \$119, per order, of course. Day after day, our needs are used to get our attention.

We use metaphors to spark memories that will bring meaning to our lives. That is what Jesus did, but honestly, sincerely, and compassionately. Deep down those Jewish peasants knew that following this man around the country would not guarantee food and water for the rest of their lives, but their hungers met his claim to be the source and sustenance of life and sparked their desire to follow him and see what might happen.

Not everyone was hooked, however, especially when he used the phrase, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

Those first two words—“I am”—hold more meaning for the Jewish people than we generally understand. To hear those words sends them back in time to another deserted hillside where a befuddled shepherd stands looking at a burning bush. Moses had escaped Egypt after killing an Egyptian for striking a Hebrew man. He found a friendly tribe in the desert, married the priest’s daughter, and became a shepherd. In the peacefulness of solitude and safety, he came upon a bush on fire and was quickly informed that he was on holy ground. God met Moses that day and told him to go back to Egypt and set his people free. When Moses balked and made up all sorts of excuses for not being equipped for such a job, including not knowing the name of this god who spoke from a bush, God said, “I AM WHO I AM . . . say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

When some people in the crowd heard Jesus say, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” memory and meaning immediately kicked in. They understood what Jesus was saying, but they were not happy about it. Was this man actually claiming to be God? How preposterous! How blasphemous! We know him! We grew up with him! We know his father and mother. He is from Nazareth, not heaven. He is the son of Joseph, not the Son of God! That memory made it difficult for some of them to understand the metaphor.

There are times when our own memories, our own experiences make it difficult for us to see Jesus for who he is and to discover how God is present in our world. Some of us grew up with a demanding, authoritarian, king-like God who set down rules and expected us to follow them or else. Others of us grew up with a permissive God who understood our foibles and failures, who readily forgave and rarely asked anything of us. Some of us grew up with a generous if somewhat temperamental God who would give us what we

wanted if we asked passionately and frequently enough but who also capriciously might take what we love the most in order to teach us a lesson. Still others of us grew up confused about all of the different images of God we were presented and which one, if any, was the true God. Our experience of God throughout life, good or bad, effects how we understand God today.

Jesus understood these things and that is why he chose the metaphor of being the bread of life as a way to help us know who God is. He knew that people would make the connection with the experience of their ancestors eating manna in the desert, but he wanted them to know that the nourishment he offered was different. The manna, which was delivered daily like a fine frost on the ground, only lasted for a day. It was temporary in order to provide sustenance for that day. The bread of life, however, is eternal. Jesus provides sustenance forever. We know that the daily craving for food and water will continue. Our spiritual hungers, however, can be met by God who will satisfy those cravings forever. In the divine-human gift of Jesus Christ, God provides all that we need for life—physically and spiritually.

Jesus also tapped into their memories to help them understand that the God who set all of life into motion was still with them in that very moment. By using those two simple words “I am,” Jesus took them back, not only to Moses’ encounter with God, but to God’s creation of the world. God told Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” . . . “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). That Hebrew phrase “I AM” is a form of the verb “to be.” It suggests that God is being himself and the source of all else that exists. Furthermore, the phrase “I AM WHO I AM” can also be translated as “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be” suggesting that God is unique and creative. The Hebrew people were reminded that God is the source of life and the One who sustains life. If Jesus is indeed this God, then God is present and active among them. Truly he is!

In John’s Gospel, Jesus uses this form of speech to introduce seven metaphors that help us better understand who he is: “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48, 51), “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5), “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7, 9), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6), and “I am the true vine” (15:1). Each of those images connected with the Hebrew people through their past experience, their daily lives, or their hopes for the future. Each image stirred memories of how life works. And each one gave meaning to who Jesus was for them.

In his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, physician, musician, and theologian Albert Schweitzer summed up how God in Christ reveals himself to us:

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”<sup>1</sup>

In what ways is God present in your life? What metaphors speak to your experience with God? What memories of God’s involvement in your life bring new meaning for God’s care for you now? A simple phrase like “I am the bread of life” can remind us that God is the source and sustenance of all of life, now and forever. Revive your best memory of God’s care for you and allow it to create new meaning for God’s future for you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, W. Montgomery, trans., from the First German Edition "Von Reimarus zu Wrede," 1906, (Great Britain: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1910).

August 12, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We admit, O God, that there are days when we feel as if there is so much bad news that not enough good news could ever turn things around. Then we pause and remember the abundant ways you have blessed us and the myriad times you have helped us and we know that life is still good at its core. We are all too familiar with the sorrow of the world, but we also know the joy that comes from you. We are grateful and celebrate the many ways you hold and sustain us day by day.

Thank you for every reminder of your goodness that came our way this past week. As we look back, we see prayers that were answered in ways we did not anticipate. We recognize opportunities that we never imagined. And we know the many ways that you supported and encouraged us when we were not even aware that you knew our needs. Thank you, O God, for loving us moment by moment.

As a new week begins, we admit that our needs have not diminished although our anxiety over your care has. You know better than we do what lies ahead of us and we can only ask that you keep us steady, you renew our strength, and you provide the resources we need to live fully day by day.

We do pray, O God, for people among us and across the earth who face challenges we cannot begin to imagine. We pray for people whose physical needs place them at death's door and for people whose emotional and spiritual needs leave them on the border of despair. Bring help to these sisters and brothers, we pray. Transform life around them so that they may thrive again. Change us so that we might better understand their plight and enlarge our hearts so that we care all the more. Help us to help one another, we pray.

Teach us what it means for you to be the bread of our lives, O God, and then help us to recognize our own hunger. Nourish us with the food that brings true life and quench our parched spirits. Be for us what we cannot be for ourselves and make us whole again for we ask these things in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.