

## **Sunday 19B 2009**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 9, 2009

John 6:35, 41-51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“It’s the greatest thing since sliced bread!” Have you ever heard that? “The greatest thing since sliced bread.”

One thing about bread is how quickly it goes stale. Bread has a crust, and the crust keeps the inside soft. And so historically— and humankind has been baking bread from wheat flour for at least 3,500 years— historically, you did not break open a loaf until it was time to eat. Once you break bread open, it goes stale quickly. So we have the biblical expression “break bread,” which means to share a meal. The loaf would not be broken open until mealtime.

The American invention of sliced bread took two inventions: the actual bread slicing machine, plus the machine for plastic wrapping. Because bread used to be sold unwrapped. I remember being in Paris, France. A city that takes bread seriously. And at the evening rush hour, you see all the commuters carrying home a stick of bread, held in their hand with just a napkin. Fresh out of the oven, riding on the subway, on the way to the dinner table, no need for plastic. But sliced bread— because it will go stale— must be wrapped in plastic. And soon a huge array of chemicals and preservatives were added to sliced bread to prevent staleness and to ensure uniformity. And so sliced bread in plastic, mass produced with preservatives, lacks the taste and the unique character of traditional bread.

So it’s easy for a snooty person to say that traditional bread is better. But if you’re a Mom, and you have five kids, and you’re making sandwiches for lunch, sliced bread really is a great invention. And that shows you how bread really is essential to the human diet. Those of you who have gone on low-carb diets know exactly how important and large the role of bread is in our diet, because you had to give up bread. Bread has been crucial to human life and human civilization. You can actually write the history of the Roman Empire based on bread, because it was crucial to keep the flow of wheat flour going into Rome. And, of course, the French Revolution can largely be traced using the price and availability of bread as a guide.

So Jesus compared himself to bread. Not to meat. Not to fruit. Not to cheese. Not to eggs. But bread. The common component— and the filling component— of the diet for so many human beings. Common, yet nourishing. Common, yet really a miracle, for anyone who has ever made bread themselves.

I think when Jesus was young he watched his mother doing household chores. When he was grown up, he would tell this parable: *“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”* That world of bakers that talks about yeast starters, and yeast sponges. And how you take dough with yeast, and put it into dough without yeast, and the yeast grows. Except in Jesus’ day they didn’t know that it was yeast, and they didn’t know that it was a bacteria. It just happened. I think the boy Jesus must have accompanied his mother to the market, where she bought the flour to make the bread. He could talk about, *“A GOOD measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.”* One cup of flour does not equal another cup of flour. Sifted flour is full of air. But if you shake it down, and press it down, it’s a lot denser. So from the early days, I think Jesus was paying attention to the way in which common bread is made through a process that is really uncommon.

And then as an older boy, as a teenager, he would have watched the rituals of eating. At Thanksgiving, my Mom always cut the turkey in the kitchen. But if you are really old-fashioned, someone carves the turkey at the table. And that’s usually the duty of the head of the household, isn’t it? Mom may have baked the turkey, but Dad carves it. Did you know that in a pack of wolves, they act together to kill their prey, but the senior wolf– the Alpha male– assigns the pieces of the meat to the various wolves? In my family, also, the senior member of the household prayed. The Jewish version of this– which we have folded into our celebration of the Eucharist– is that the senior member of the household gives the prayer of blessing. And then breaks the bread– remember, traditionally there was no pre-sliced bread– and gives it to the person next to him, and it gets passed around.

This is what Jesus observed growing up, and so as the senior member– the master, the rabbi– of his little gang, he said the blessing and broke the bread. And he invited his followers to consider that the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet– a huge celebration– the best and happiest thing that ever happened in most people’s lives in his society– the equivalent of Christmas for us– the best and happiest time– but still at the center of that wedding banquet is that common Jewish action of taking bread, giving thanks, breaking it, and giving it.

I have incredibly vivid memories of Thanksgiving at my grandparents’ house. I remember the iced tea was so cold, and I put the sugar in and stirred and stirred and stirred and it wouldn’t dissolve. I remember the tray of garnishes– funny foods that you never saw at any other time– pickles, and celery lined with cream cheese, and radishes, and olives. And my grandfather, at the opposite end of the table, and his horrible prayer– which not only went on forever and ever– and traditionally my family eats at 2 p.m., and a child is starving by 2 p.m. if there was no lunch– not only was it long, but something about my grandfather’s personal spirituality meant that he had to recite the prayer in a low voice which almost no one else could hear.

It is vivid in my imagination. The colors are brighter than real life. Over the weekend, a movie about cooking opened. *Julie and Julia*. That prompted an article in last Sunday’s *New York Times* magazine, about cooking shows. Nobody cooks anymore. But everyone watches cooking

shows. The conclusion of the article is that food preparation takes us back to a secure place, that childhood in the kitchen where we got to lick the frosting off of the spatula, and watch our mothers and grandmothers– and occasionally fathers and grandfathers– work that magic alchemy. I can almost smell my grandmother’s kitchen. Not quite, but almost. The memory of the smell is enough to change my emotions.

In that terrible night in which he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus grounded his followers in a ritual that was domestic. It was nourishing, it was familiar, it was nurturing, it was peaceful. It can make you remember a long departed saint– like my grandfather, gone now for more than 30 years. It can take you backwards in time, or around the world, and Jesus indicated, it could also take us forward in time, and into a new world.

I was talking with one of our own saints this week, living with incurable cancer. He was talking about his faith. You can’t see it, he says. Faith is about unseen things. Although his faith is strong, many others of us wonder *where* is God? What do we really know? Jesus says to look to the meal. Jesus says to look at the bread. That’s where he promises to be for us. In the most terrible times of life, when all things seem to be breaking apart. 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.* Amen.