

Pastor's Message – 8/11/24
John 6:35, 41-51

Some of you are aware that I grew up in Milwaukee, so you can imagine the only experience I had with farms and farm life was going on a vacation to my mother's aunt's farm near Friendship. That was the only place that I met cows and corn and the rooster that chased me one day and the tractor I accidentally started which I wasn't supposed to be on in the first place.

Farming was a foreign experience for me and, with the decline in the number of farms and more and more people living in cities, a foreign experience for more and more people. City folks and city kids have lost, to a great extent, any understanding of where their food comes from.

All they know is the bread they buy in the supermarket is baked in some central factory facility, if they even know that, many miles away, packed in a plastic bag, and sliced to fit the toaster. Most, many, cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. It may make it challenging for us to hear and understand when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Not so for the people of Jesus' time. It was a familiar site in every village through which Jesus and his disciples walked: the conical clay ovens, fired with wood, in which the women of each household would bake the daily ration of bread. These ovens were located out back, behind the houses, to offset the risk of fire. Early each morning, the baker-women would sweep out the ashes from the day before and stoke the ovens with dry sticks. They'd light the fire and direct a child to keep feeding dry branches into it, until the required temperature was reached.

While this was happening, the women would go through the familiar ritual of bread-making: preparing the dough from flour

and water, kneading it, adding the yeast, waiting for the dough to rise, then pounding it down — only to have it rise again. When it reached the desired consistency, the bakers would press it out flat and slide it into the clay oven. What came out was a warm, bubbly loaf very much like pita bread. It was the stuff of life, indeed. Other food items might come and go with the seasons — with the success of those who hunted or fished for it — but bread was the staple that got them through feast and famine alike.

Today, we can walk into the bakery section of any supermarket, and you'll be faced with a bewildering variety of choices: not just the old choices of white, whole wheat, or rye, but seeded or unseeded, lite or regular, 7-grain or 12-grain, and so on. Almost gone from our thinking is the understanding of bread as simply bread: "the stuff of life," a staple food item, the product of God's generous provision for our lives, fashioned by the hands of others into something nourishing. It is this simpler, more universal idea Jesus is referring to when he says, "I am the bread of life."

But what if Jesus said, "I am the peach of life"?

Not the bread -- the peach.

"I am the peach of life, from Xi Wang-mu's garden. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The communion services in churches around the world would be forever changed. Instead of squares of bread, we'd be eating slices of peaches.

Of course, the breaking of the bread would be a bit of a problem. Kind of hard to break a peach.

But peaches have a connection to eternal life, at least in China. The peaches grown in the garden of the goddess Xi Wang-mu [pronounced Shee Wong moo] are an example of godly gastronomy.

According to Chinese mythology, the gods are nourished by a steady diet of special peaches that take thousands of years to ripen. Called "the peaches of immortality," they come from Xi Wang-mu's garden, and give long life to anyone who eats them -- in fact, 3,000 years from a single peach. The goddess was famous for serving these peaches to her guests, who would then become immortal.

One time, the trickster god Monkey devoured an entire crop in one year. As punishment, he was expelled from heaven and sentenced to a lifetime of stone fruit.

Bad Monkey.

But Jesus doesn't say, "I am the peach of life." Instead, he asserts, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35). The person who eats this bread is promised endless satisfaction -- freedom from hunger and thirst -- and life everlasting (v. 51).

But not everyone believes what Jesus says. Some people listening to him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee are very skeptical -- much as we might be when we hear the myth of the Chinese peaches of immortality.

In particular, the Jews complain about Jesus because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They know that he's the son of Joseph and Mary, a couple of regular Galileans that they know personally. With the two of them as his parents, they wonder how he can say, "I have come down from heaven" (vv. 41-42). Some religious leaders challenged Jesus' claim in our Bible reading today. They suggested that Jesus was simply human like the rest of them. They know his parents. He can't be from God.

They said they had the prophets; they had Moses. They had the corporate memory of God feeding them with manna in the desert. What did Jesus have?

Jesus discredited their religious commitments, trumping their objection by appealing to the prophets Himself (verse 45) and the ongoing activity of the Father ("they shall all be taught by God," Isaiah 54:13). They missed the point; they missed the announcement of God's real presence with them in Jesus. They missed heaven for earth. Right in front of them.

I mentioned in my sermon last week that those who followed Jesus after being fed from five loaves and two fishes were looking for proof from Jesus. They were a reasonable people and so are we. We are suspicious of grandiose claims. If the 10-year-old daughter of your next-door neighbor claims, "I have come down from heaven," you're going to assume that she has an active imagination. If the 30-year-old daughter of a neighbor says, "I have come down from heaven," you might recommend a visit to a mental health professional.

It's not about proof. It's about believing. Eternal life comes from putting faith in Jesus Christ. It's not about the bread. It's about the belief. We eat bread, but we ingest Jesus. To take the "bread of life" means daily reading of Scripture, meditation on the Scripture, group Bible study, and perhaps as important or more so, people actually doing what Jesus says and reporting what happens when they do that, i.e., telling the good news of what Jesus has done and is still doing in and around your lives!

It's not really about bread or peaches or anything else that we eat one day and are hungry again the next. It is about inviting and welcoming Jesus into our hearts and our souls. It's about trusting and depending on Jesus to give us our daily bread: His presence, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. It is about the blessed assurance that we are what we eat and ingesting Jesus, we become like Him.

Jesus offers His presence to satisfy our hungry hearts, not our hungry stomachs – not just for today, but for our whole lives.