

“What Feeds You?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**John 6: 35, 41-51**

What’s your favorite food? Go ahead – tell me (ask for responses). Hamburgers, pizza, steak, pasta, ice cream, cakes, chocolate. We all have our favorites for whatever reason. For some of us, a particular food brings back memories that are treasured and special, such as holidays and family gatherings. For some of us, the taste of a certain food item satisfies our cravings, and we become less anxious once we’ve put it in our mouth. For some of us, a certain meal or dish is part of our daily or weekly routine, and when we don’t have it, we can feel out-of-sorts.

Food is one of those things in life that has multiple layers of meaning. When we are preparing a meal or a dish, there is great time and effort and love which goes into making something special for ourselves and for others. When we are sitting down to eat a meal with others, it is not just the food but the conversation and the presence of others which feeds our soul. When we are by ourselves, sometimes eating can be an act of soothing and healing amid our loneliness. When we are travelling in a foreign place, trying new foods can be exhilarating and terrifying, all at the same time.

Think about how it feels when you’ve had a truly filling, satisfying meal. It probably has been balanced between fruits, vegetables, protein, and grains. You probably weren’t in a huge rush to eat it, so you allowed your body to process and digest the meal in a natural way. You likely didn’t have an urge to supplement your meal an hour later with snacks or sweets. I would argue in the fast-paced world we live in, eating a truly satisfying meal like that is more the exception than the norm. But when we are nourished like that, it reminds us of how good it feels to be fully satisfied and strengthened for what lies ahead.

The truth is, food is something we depend on to stay alive. If we don’t eat consistently, we will lose weight, become malnourished, and gradually wither away. If we don’t eat well-balanced, healthy meals consistently, our health is affected in unhealthy ways, as well. We all have that one thing which we crave and desire when we are nervous, anxious, worried, or stressed. Mine is salty food – crackers, chips, anything that stimulates those savory taste buds in my mouth. And then I like to pair that with some milk chocolate. And some sweet tea. Anyway, enough about me . . .

Here’s the thing. When we feed on things like snacks and sweets and junk food, in the short-term we are filled up, but in the long-term, we are less satisfied. Our cravings come back sooner and more robustly, because we are not feeding our bodies in the most complete and healthy way. My mind knows this, but many times my body doesn’t care what my mind thinks. It just

wants what it's craving. The challenge of nourishing our bodies physically is the need for discipline of our minds over our innate cravings. Only then are we able to find balance and health in how we sustain our physical well-being for the long-term.

In today's passage, Jesus gives us an image of himself which is easy to relate to. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35). We can identify with the need for something to eat and something to drink so that we might live another day. And it is not the only time we hear Jesus using such an image to help us understand who he is in relation to God the Father. But as is usually the case with any of his sayings, there is much more to our understanding of the Word made flesh than a simple little slogan. As "the bread of life," Jesus provides a food which is unlike anything we can feed upon here on earth. And it is through feeding on him that we are invited by God to feast on the grace and love which only can come from him.

One commentator writes: *It is important to clarify that as the bread of life Jesus is "the bread that came down from heaven" (vs. 38, 41, 50-51). Though described with an image from ordinary life, Jesus is unique. He even defies comparison with the miraculous manna that sustained the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Those who ate the manna "died" (v. 49). They were nourished only for a day. But as the bread from heaven, Jesus gives the life of the age to come, the life that has about it the tang of eternity, "so that one may eat of it and not die" (v. 50). Even the reality of physical death is not ignored, since eternal life includes the promise that there will be a resurrection at the last day (vs. 39, 44, 54). The bread from heaven, then, satisfies the human hunger both now and for the future.*

*The religious authorities, in line with their ancestors who "complained" at the exodus from Egypt (see Ex. 15:24; 16:2, 7-12; Num. 11:1), "complain" about the assertion that Jesus is the bread "from heaven" (John 6:41). How can a person whose name and address are well documented claim to be from God? The religious authorities know his mother and father, which precludes a heavenly origin. Instead of being open to the divine claim, they judge it by human wisdom. What they know (or think they know) keeps them from the only knowledge that really matters (Texts for Preaching, Year B, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©1993: 463).*

Sometimes we have to get out of the way of reality to trust and believe that something better might be out there. The authorities saw Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary - "whose father and mother we know" - and could not see the possibility that he was someone greater. It takes a risk of faith to step out and believe that something greater is out there. But that step is not without help, or at least, an invitation.

William Willimon writes: *Whatever we need in order to comprehend Jesus must come as a gift, insight not of our own devising. It must "come down from heaven." Lest all this talk of "heaven" suggest that we are here dealing with ethereal, otherworldly fuzziness, Jesus compares his significance*

*to that of everyday, mundane, bread. He may be “from heaven” but he is also that which has “come down.” He is the Word, the eternal Word “made flesh.”*

*Here, standing before us, in the flesh, is the fullness of God. If you have ever wondered just what God looks like, or how God acts, or how God talks, then wonder no more. In this faith, we do not have to climb up to the divine; God discloses, unveils, climbs down to us.*

*Let’s admit it. There’s something within us that likes our gods high and lifted up, distant, exclusively in heaven. We so want religion to be something spiritual, rather than something that is uncomfortably incarnational. Yet here we are with God-in-the-flesh before us saying, “I’m your bread; feed on me!”*

*Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to assuage our emptiness. Our culture is a vast supermarket of desire. Can it be that our bread, our wine, our fulfillment stands before us in the presence of this crucified, resurrected Jew? Can it be that many of our desires are, in the eternal scheme of things, pointless? Might it be true that he is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek? Is it true that God has come to us, miraculously with us, before us, like manna that is miraculously dropped into our wilderness? (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3; Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2009: 337*).*

What feeds you in the wilderness of life? What feeds you when you are starving for hope, meaning, and love? What feeds you in the moment and for a lifetime? Where do you turn for God’s nourishing grace?

I have witnessed many times, when people are spiritually drained, that they go to fast food, short-term fixes to get replenished. A particular program at a friend’s church which meets their immediate need. A powerful preacher who they feel spiritually feeds them. Those options are great, and perhaps are filling in the short-term. But if that isn’t paired with entering into community and sustained connection with others in a variety of ways, then the spiritual rumblings in their soul will get stirred-up in short order. The bread of life does not feed us solely in isolation as individuals. The bread of life came so that his body, the church, might be strengthened and uplifted. It is when we remain connected and invested in the community of faith that we are fed consistently and thoroughly in all times of life.

And last Sunday was a great example of that in our church. To witness and hear the stories of faith which our youth shared with us last week reminded me that they have been, are, and will be fed by the bread of life in this place. They have experienced God’s love and grace and support amid this community of disciples, and through that support will be nourished for the long-term through the peaks and valleys which will come. For as they face changes and new adventures and impactful decisions and celebrations and disappointments and everything else in between, they are part of a community which is nourished by the bread of life. Their connection with one another, with each of us, with God is their source of strength and sustenance, and that gives me joy and peace and hope for the future.

I also witnessed the power of community giving comfort and strength this week amid a tragic loss. Harris Endy-Daniel was a senior at Pike High School, a drummer in the marching band, and a warm, friendly soul to many kids in the band and at school. Last Sunday afternoon, Harris was at his job, and after doing some physical exertion he told his co-workers he didn't feel good and went to lie down in the breakroom. Harris never woke up. He died from an undiagnosed, hereditary heart disease. He was seventeen years old.

What you also need to know about Harris is that for the last couple of years, he has not lived with his family. Due to unhealthy circumstances with his biological family, he lived with two different families in the Pike Band program, so that he would have a safe, healthy environment in which to live and grow. In a time of great need in his life, these families welcomed him in and not only fed him physically, but fed him emotionally and spiritually. One of those families was Risa Flight's family. Risa has been Maddie Andrews and Heather Mansell's flute teacher, and has played here in worship with them at different times over the last several years. As you can imagine, this has been particularly hard for them to accept and digest.

But what I have witnessed this week reaffirms for me the way God feeds us through community. Whether it was Sunday evening when over one hundred people gathered at the high school to remember Harris; or whether it was seeing students, parents, and faculty comforting and supporting one another at the band's practice on Tuesday; or whether it was seeing that over \$10,000 has already been raised so that Harris might have a proper funeral, as well as establish a scholarship in his memory - the community is being fed by God and is feeding one another in a time of great need. I am grateful that my girls and our family are a part of this community.

What feeds you? Where do you turn for spiritual nourishment? How might the bread of life sustain you not just today, but every day you are blessed to be on this earth? "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." When you are hungry, turn to the bread of life. For he is the one who will nourish you and sustain the community, now and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.