

³⁵Jesus said 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. ⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Having heard the word of the Lord, let us pray for inspiration from God’s Spirit. Oh Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God, Our Rock and our Redeemer, we pray, Amen.

This morning, we’re going to talk a lot about food. I hope you all had breakfast, because if you didn’t, this sermon will drive you absolutely crazy.

Now, you’ll find, as we get to know one another, that I am the kind of minister who loves to have dialogue. I believe that prayer is a two-way conversation, and I believe good preaching is the same. I don’t want to just stand here and speak to you. I want to speak with you. For example, is anyone brave enough to say out loud what you had for breakfast this morning?

Excellent, thank you! This past week, late-morning, as we were out running errands and my family and I went to a diner, and I just randomly chose something off the menu. It was a Sailor's breakfast. Good gracious do sailors eat well! It was eggs and toast and home fries and hash and baked beans! I didn't eat again until about 7 p.m. that night. Maybe that's the point. Fill the sailors up at breakfast and then you don't have to feed them again til dinner.

My kids aren't built that way. They ate well at the diner but were hungry again two hours later. They eat every two hours when they're awake. Every. Two. Hours. No matter what we feed them. No matter how much they eat or claim to be completely full and can't finish what we served them.

Sometimes we've barely cleaned up one meal and loaded the dishwasher when they're coming back to us with, "My belly says I'm hungry. What can I have?"

Our food bills are ridiculous.

But they're growing, active kids. I get it. And when they're hungry . . . Well, I don't know if you've experienced this but kids who are hungry tend to be . . . emotional. Do you all know that term – hangry? Anger brought on by hunger? Hangry? I do. I know that emotion. I face it daily.

For the majority of us, when our bodies need nutrition, sensors go off inside of us and we recognize our need to eat. Our stomachs produce a hormone called ghrelin which tells our brain that we need to eat. Our body may become weak or shaky. You may become irritable or get a headache. Our senses heighten and we smell foods and see foods all around us. Commercials and billboards for even junk food make our mouths water. We have cravings! Even our pets know when it's time to eat. They have internal clocks that remind them that we should be feeding them, right?

In our text for today, Jesus uses one of the "I am" metaphors that appear throughout the Gospel of John. Last week we alluded to the metaphor, "I am the Good Shepherd." This week, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Rev. Debie Thomas, an Episcopal writer who was born in India and grew up in Boston writes, “Am I hungry *for God*? Do I feel in my gut that Jesus is “elemental provision?” Not appetizer, not dessert, not occasional supplement, but essential, everyday food without which I will starve?”

I like her question, and her distinction between Jesus as a supplemental part of our diet versus the essential part of it, and it reminds me of the complex time we live in. For most of human history, a person’s diet was very simple and repetitive. Eggs, freshly made bread, vegetables, some meat source. It was often the same from day to day. Bread was an essential staple in a person’s diet for thousands upon thousands of years. And it was repetitive, consistent; it always tasted the same.

In today’s world, we crave variety. We rarely enjoy eating leftovers or having the same menu over and over. We have a global palate and we enjoy mixing Italian pasta and Chinese rice dishes and Mexican tortillas in with French pastries and fried seafood and fruits grown around the world that are always available in our produce sections. We are a people who crave variety.

I’m so grateful that we live in a time in history in which we can have a global variety of foods all year long. Consider the bread aisle in a grocery store. We have white bread, wheat bread, whole wheat bread, honey wheat, whole grain, potato bread, Italian bread, rye bread, sourdough bread, challah bread, jalapeno cheese bread, cinnamon raisin bread, gluten free bread, and that’s not including English muffins, bagels, donuts, or buns!

I have a bread machine; and I love, love, love the smell of freshly baked bread, but I haven’t made a loaf in quite a long time. Unlike the people of Jesus’s day who had to make bread frequently, perhaps daily. For them, making bread was a daily chore, like getting water from the well. Essential to life but very, very routine. Bread in Jesus’ day was a plain, reliable, staple.

It was cheap and filling and relatively easy to make. But perhaps not something you craved. In my mind, a craving is for something we really enjoy. One of our favorite things. So

let me ask you this, do you have any particular cravings? If you were, heaven forbid, in the hospital on a clear, liquid diet, what would you be craving? Coffee in the morning? Ice cream? Does anybody have any cravings they want to share? How about the artichoke dip that I've been promised during fellowship time? I'll admit, I'm craving that, so trust me, this sermon isn't going to last much longer!

. . . But the primary question for today is - Do we crave time with Jesus?

Jesus, speaking metaphorically as he often does, invites the crowds to recognize the hungers *beneath* their hungers. Of course they're hungry for literal bread; he just turned 5 barley loaves and two fish into food for thousands of people in the verses just before these that we read today. He knows how to make actual bread, and he knows that people have physical needs. He did, too. There's nothing wrong, substandard, or "unspiritual" about physical hunger — we are called to feed the poor. But he doesn't stop there. Instead, he uses the physical bread to ask a metaphorical question, what are you spiritually hungry for, hungers that only the "bread of life" can satisfy.

What are those hungers? I can only answer for myself, so here's my list: I crave peace – the peace that passes understanding for myself and those I love and the whole wide world. I crave wisdom and maturity. I crave common sense. I crave compassion. I crave patience. I crave community. All those things come from the source - God Almighty. And I believe, as a Christian, that I can get all that at the feet of Jesus Christ. So, I crave Jesus. Jesus is essential to my well-being. I need Jesus like I need clean water and food.

Of course, it's one thing to name our hungers, but quite another to trust that Jesus will satisfy them. After all, we're so good at finding substitutes for communion with God. Mine include perpetual busyness, social media, books, movies, the 24-hour-news-cycle, exercise, chocolate, and other people. Do I really trust that Jesus is my bread? My essential sustenance? Very often, the answer is no.

But if I neglect to fill myself with the “bread of life,” I find that I’m more irritable, pessimistic, angry, and hopeless. I feel more judgmental and moody. A daily serving of Jesus keeps me grounded in goodness.

But perhaps you’re wondering to yourself, how to get a daily serving of Jesus. We only have church once a week. We only have communion once a month. Maybe you’re thinking that I’m suggesting that you have to read your Bible every day, but you don’t have the time, or the desire, to do that. I get it. Books of the bible like Numbers and Nahum are hard to enjoy. Or you tried in the past to have a disciplined prayer time and it never took root in your daily routine. Well, thankfully, receiving the “bread of life” daily, is not as repetitive and boring as eating the same manna as the wandering Israelites did for forty years in the desert. There’s a variety of ways to access it. Take a walk outside. Come to church. Volunteer for your community. Play with a child and let their imagination run wild. Sit outside and listen to nature. Call someone you love. Turn on a beautiful piece of music. The bread of life isn’t a flavorless, stale piece of bread. It’s like a warm, buttery, chocolate croissant. Now that gets my mouth watering.

But I also want to address the portion of the scripture that says, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Again, Jesus is not speaking physically here. He, as much as anyone, enjoyed a good meal and a good drink. Many of his best teachings were done at a table. Even after he was resurrected, he made bread on the shoreline of the sea of Galilee and had breakfast with his disciples. He experienced hunger and cravings.

Instead, what he is suggesting here, is that he is enough. Jesus is enough to satisfy. While there are a number of ways to experience Jesus in life, Jesus is enough. You don’t need a bit of Jesus and a bit of something else, and a side of this and a side of that. Jesus is enough for your spirit.

He wants us to crave the Bread of Life as much as we crave the nutrition we need to survive. For our spirits to release ghrelin and which tells our brains we need more Jesus in our lives. And while you can have too much of a good thing, like a Sailor’s breakfast or fried

calamari, you can never have too much of the Bread of Life, so help yourself. Pass the basket around and then ask for more. The bread of life is for you. Take and eat. Amen.