

Today we are going to talk about one of my favorite topics: food. You know how people talk about how you either “live to eat” or “eat to live”? I do both. We’re not just talking about any type of food though. We are talking about...any guesses? Bread. (SLIDE) Now when I think of bread, my mind wanders. White, wheat, rye, cracked oat, multi-grain, banana, zucchini. Can you imagine tasting it? But bread is not limited to a slice of Sara Lee. Bread includes (SLIDES)...croissants, biscuits, muffins, tortillas, naan, bagels, crackers, lefse, communion wafers...and, what we are talking about today, the best thing BEFORE and SINCE sliced bread? Jesus, the bread of life. **Take and eat.**

Now, if you’re having déjà vu and thinking this is what Pastor Joel talked about two weeks ago, and what Pastor Peter talked about last Sunday, you’d be right. (SLIDE) We’ve had this diet of bread, week after week, that may feel stale, but there’s more for us to unpack, more for us to “crunch and munch” on, more for us to taste and see.

The Gospel of John is different from the other three Gospels. In John, you never really know what’s what: water is not really water, a door is more than a piece of wood with a knob, wind is more than wind, bread is not only bread, it is life. But what does this mean? We tend to gloss over this part of scripture. It’s a nice phrase, but do we really grasp what Jesus is saying?

This chapter of John begins with two miracles: (SLIDE) the feeding of the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and then Jesus walking on water. After these two astounding things, people flocked to Jesus like the paparazzi. It was great for Jesus’ public image, but the people still didn’t get it. Jesus wasn’t just a fad or a spectacle. He told the people, “Look you’re following me around because you saw miracles. But those 5,000 people that I fed are going to be hungry tomorrow. Their hunger will never end. But I came not simply to provide bread for the body, but to give bread for the soul. I came to give you something you can’t get anywhere else. I am the bread of life. (SLIDE) Those who believe in me will never hunger again.”

When Jesus says these words, it is the first of the great, “I am” sayings. Later Jesus says, “I am the light of the world,” “I am the gate”, “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” “I am the true vine.” Jesus doesn’t just claim to know these things or explain these things. He proclaims he IS these things. Jesus first promises, “I am the bread of life that came down from heaven.” **Take and eat.**

What does the crowd do after hearing this? They get upset. They’re offended! They knew Jesus as being one of their own. They knew him as Mary and Joseph’s nice son who lived down the street, just like you know the kids from your neighborhood. Jesus can’t possibly be what he is claiming to be! They had watched him play and learn, grow up, and eventually leave home. Jesus is ordinary. He’s one of them. “How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’ and expect anyone to believe him?”

When we think of God, we want a God who is strong, powerful, and mighty, who swoops in like a superhero when we are in need. Like the people gathered that day, we don't think of a neighborhood boy rising in fame as being the answer to our deepest longings and greatest needs. They, like we, know first-hand their sin and faithlessness, their flaws and failures. They, like us, know their doubts and fears, their broken promises and foolish prejudices. They, like the world, know shame, disappointment, and regret. (SLIDE) Like a snail who carries its shell, we carry this stuff around on our backs, and it weighs us down. The crowd wonders, how in the world can Jesus, someone like them, someone like us, save?

What does Jesus do in response? He tells them to calm down. They're not in charge. God, and God alone, is. (SLIDE) We are to believe that we have the promise of eternal life through Jesus, who was ordinary and common, like you and me, and yet, also divine, the very Son of God. This claim that offended the crowd still offends people today. We expect God to come in might, and God shows up in places of weakness. We look for God to come in power, and God comes in vulnerability. We seek God in righteousness and justice, but we most clearly find God in forgiveness and mercy. We wish for a superhero Jesus beyond our imagination, and we get Jesus who took on flesh, born to a teenage mother, and became like us, became *with* us, became with the lowly, the outcast, the sinful, the lost, *you and me*, so that God could save the world. Jesus proclaims, "Here is bread that truly comes from heaven. I am the living bread. (SLIDE) Anyone who eats this will live forever." **Take and eat.**

Out of all the food Jesus could say "I am," why bread? Why not a juicy steak, or a nutritious apple, or protein-filled spinach, or plant-based tofu! Can you imagine Jesus saying, "I am the tofu of life?" When I think of bread I think of it being satisfying. It fills, and eases hunger, but it's plain and ordinary, and it's accessible the world over. It's different in every culture, but the results are the same. It nourishes, but not in some fancy way. It's dependable for everyone, the young and the old, the rich and the poor. Day in and day out, we can take and eat the gift of bread that satisfies our hunger.

Still, the loaves we feed our bodies, don't feed our souls. The promise today is that Jesus has something more for each of us. The living bread is a gift (SLIDE) he shares forever with everyone, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the faithful and the faithless, the sinner and the saint. Jesus gives life to the world, astonishingly, by dying for it. **Take and eat.**

This is good news! This is great news! Eternal life is ours. That's what being a Christian is all about, right? That by believing this truth, we have been gifted a life-insurance plan for the hereafter? Some believe that if we are good enough here on earth when we die we get to go to heaven and be a part of the spiritual one percent for eternity, and live in big mansions with Jesus, and wear awesome jewels and walk streets of

gold. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says “This makes it sound like eternal life is basically about getting to live like Liberace forever.”

Don’t get me wrong, (SLIDE) as Christians our hope lies in the promise of eternal life. We believe death does not have the last word, that beyond death of these human bodies is an abundant, everlasting life with God. This is beautiful, and it IS good news. But I don’t think this is the whole promise.

Eternal life is more than just what happens after we die. It’s about life, (SLIDE) here and now. It’s life that comes from knowing that death has finally been put in its place. It’s the freedom to let go of the things that weigh us down: sin, shame, regret, anger, disappointment, and fear, you fill in the blank, so that we can live a new abundant life today. Too often we dwell in the past. We worry about it being terrifyingly final. We think about what’s happened and remember the moments we will never get back. It robs us of the present moment. Too often we worry about the future. It’s vast and frightening. We fear over what will or won’t happen to us. This, too, robs us of the present.

But God is present to you now, not in the past or the future, but in this very moment. Jesus said “I AM the bread of life.” Not that I was or will be, but I AM. As Kierkegaard says, Christ’s presence on earth is never a bygone event. It’s not something we remember from ancient history, it’s always a present reality. It’s a promise that Christ made in the past, which continues in the future, but is most especially for you, right now.

The life that is available to you, to us, is the eternal truth that the God of the universe cares deeply and abundantly for you. You are loved. You are cherished. You are full of wonder. You are forgiven. It is the eternal truth that Jesus provides, sustains, and nourishes you every day. It is the eternal truth that God has already redeemed our past, and is already present in the future that we keep worrying about. Even for those who share their doubtful grumbles, Jesus comes as the bread of life, opening our ears and hearts to new possibilities. It is happening right now, and it is more real, and more powerful, and more wonderful than anything.

So, (SLIDE) **take and eat** of this ordinary bread today, and every day, and have faith in the extraordinary promises that belong to you. **Take and eat** and know that Jesus is present in you and through you. **Take and eat**, see, taste, touch, and feel to use all you have for God’s glory. **Take and eat** and go share this gift with our hungry world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

