

I Am the Bread of Life
John 6: 22-35
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We're starting a new series titled, "Who is Jesus?" Who is Jesus for the church, now in the present? Who is Jesus for us?

There are four books in the Bible that tell the stories of Jesus, the gospels. Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are very similar. They are called the synoptic gospels, which literally means seen together or, they see with one eye. The gospel of John is different. It tells the stories of Jesus differently. It tells different stories. Jesus is very long winded in the gospel of John, giving very long speeches. One thing that is unique about John is that Jesus makes seven I Am statements, defining who he is.

These were statements that defined who Jesus was for John's community, a church of Jewish Christians in the late first century who were dealing with a very painful separation from the synagogue because they followed Jesus. This church was anxious, and saw itself as a persecuted religious minority. These I Am statements affirm this church, and they also have something to say to us. Abby and I thought it would be helpful to go through these statements one at a time.

As we step into the 6th chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus has just miraculously fed five thousand people. The crowd likes this, amazing and nutritious, and they want to make him king, so Jesus hides. The introverts understand. That evening the disciples get into a boat and go out onto the sea, and Jesus starts walking toward them on the water. The disciples are afraid, but they take Jesus in and immediately they go to the other side of the sea. The crowd wakes up the next day, realizes that Jesus and the disciples aren't there, so they go to the other side of the sea to find them.

Eventually the crowd finds Jesus and they ask, "how did you get over here so fast?" And Jesus says, "you're just looking for me because you want more bread. You don't understand what I'm really about." Then Jesus says, "don't work for the food that perishes, but work for food that endures for eternal life." I'll talk about eternal life in a minute.

The people ask, "ok, how do we do that?" And Jesus says, "believe in me." Then he says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

For this passage to be helpful for me, I had to come to terms with a couple things: eternal life, and belief.

When I was in high school, I was in a youth group led by a Pentecostal Youth Pastor, and this was the first time I was told that I must believe in Jesus to have eternal life. What my Pentecostal youth pastor meant was, “you must believe that Jesus was sent by God to die on the cross for your sins, and if you accept it intellectually, and invite Jesus into your heart, you will be forgiven and you will go to heaven when you die. If you don’t accept this, you will still be a sinner and you won’t. I knew that this youth pastor of mine believed this with all her heart, but I simply couldn’t. This theology didn’t make sense to me.

Because of this, even though I went to my UCC church every week with my family, and though I was very earnest about wanting to follow Jesus and honor God, I was beginning to wrestle with whether I was a Christian. I didn’t know if I believed what I was supposed to believe. Since I’ve been a pastor, many people have told me “I don’t know if I believe what I’m supposed to believe and they tell me to story that leads them to feel that way.

Since high school, I’ve learned a little more about what eternal life means in the gospel of John and it is a little more complex than what my youth pastor was communicating. In the gospel of John, eternal life refers to a new dimension of life that is available in the present. This life lasts beyond time because it is of God, but it isn’t life that you wait for and receive as a reward later. Eternal life is something you step into now. It is life in God. It is life rooted in unconditional love. It is life so full of love that fear is pushed aside. It is a life so full of love that we are sent toward others to serve. It is life that stays connected to all that is holy and sacred. Like a tree that blows in the wind but the roots don’t move. This is really good life, it’s the best life.

Jesus says, “believe in me and you will step into this life. I’m the bread of this life. Follow me and you will stay connected to God which makes this life possible.

I can imagine that this message was very helpful for members of John’s church in the late first century that was going through a painful separation from the synagogue. Members of John’s church have people telling them, “following Jesus leads you away from torah, following Jesus leads you away from God.” And separation from the synagogue means separation from everything in community life. Members of John’s church are wondering if they have made the wrong choice. In response is this message with Jesus saying, “don’t fear. I’m the access point to this deep and rich life. I will keep you connected to God. Believe in me. Trust me. YOu’ll see.”

Since I live in 2017 and not at the end of the first century, I have very different problems than those John's church. I’m not going through a painful religious separation. I’m not concerned about who are who aren’t the true people of Israel. I’m fine with there being many ways of staying connected to what we call God. I’m fine with there being many different expressions of Christianity. I support thriving synagogues, and mosques and hindu and buddhist temples. I’m fine with people starting new religions. Go for it. Sounds like a good goal.

However, I do have different problems that lead to the same questions.

Can Jesus help me? Can Jesus help us? Can Jesus help us experience the good life?

A week ago Pastor Abby and I were in Carefree, AZ at the Next Generation Leadership Initiative of the United Church of Christ, advanced pastor school. I learned a lot, I sharpened my leadership skills. At the end of the week, however, a good friend of mine in the program started experiencing a mental health crisis. A week ago, while many of you were in worship, I was sitting in the waiting room of an Acute Psychiatric Center in Phoenix with three other pastors from my cohort trying to get or friend the help he needed. I was worried and heartbroken and I saw the burdens and shame that comes with mental illness. I'm hungry for healing.

By the time we were at the Acute Psychiatric Center waiting room, we had spent the night at one hospital emergency room and spent the previous afternoon at a different one. We were sent away from the Pshychiatric Center with a prescription that ended up escalating the crisis and led to a hospital admission later on Sunday. I was walking with my friend and three other pastors, and we were calling social workers and psychiatrists and psychologists that we knew to try to navigate the broken mental health system. We couldn't do it. We need to change how we handle mental health care in our country. I'm hungry for change.

At the end of this week a new president will take the oath of office. So much has been happening that it is hard to keep track of it all. I watched President Obama's speech this week and I realized how much I will miss the inclusive vision that guided him and that he embodied. He has been a hero of mine, as a leader and a person of faith whose Christian formation happened at church that I admire, Trinity UCC in the South side of Chicago, where the Rev. Jeremiah Wright use t of lead and now Otis Moss the III leads. I'm hungry for a vision that holds us all together.

Then there's all of my personal stuff. My fears, my feelings of inadequacy, the ways that I work too hard, the ways I don't work hard enough, the ways that the wounds I've experienced in my life distort how I see myself and others, the ways my failures hurt those I love and those I have never met. I'm hungry for personal healing.

In my life in the Christian faith, I trust more and more that Jesus can help with all of this, not by waving a magic wand and making it all better, but by guiding us towards life. I have come to see how Jesus invites us into life with God, into life rooted in unconditional love. I've noticed this love working on my wounds, and reshaping how I see myself and see others. I've noticed this love helping me come to terms with my failures, with my humanness. This love is helping me accept myself and accept others and remember grace.

And I see this love of God casting a vision of what life can be as we live together in community, and what life can be like as we live in the world, and we treat one another as

beloved children of God. Jesus invites us into God's dream that we see in the scriptures, and I'm taken by it. I long for it. I am so excited when I see the church working to make that dream come true.

I've found that I believe in Jesus, but not in the way that my youth pastor was talking about when I was in high school. I believe, I have come to trust, that Jesus invites me into life with God, eternal life, and this life is good for me, it is good for us. It is for all of us to share and to create right now. Jesus is the bread of that life, sustaining us.

Last Sunday evening, at our conference we celebrated closing worship. Before communion, a young colleague of mine, Jonathan Chapman invited us to the communion table saying, "to come to this table, your life doesn't need to be perfect, you don't need to have this faith stuff all figured out, you just need to be hungry." In other words, if you are longing for something better for yourself, and for our life together, we proclaim that following Jesus can help with that. May we discover that this is true, and may we find hope. Amen.