

I

A friend of mine once served as an officer aboard a fast-attack submarine in the United States Navy. A nuclear submarine is one of the most powerful and technically advanced machines ever devised by humankind, and it operates in an environment that is completely hostile to our bodies. Yet the boat never needs to be refueled at sea, and its systems can make an indefinite supply of oxygen and fresh water for the crew, so a submarine can stay submerged and on station for months at a time. But the boat can't stay submerged indefinitely, because eventually, the food supply will run out, and the crew has to eat to live.

II

As we all know, food is one of our basic human needs. We can survive for a few minutes without oxygen, a few hours without shelter, a few days without water, and maybe a week or so without food, but part of our human condition is that we have to eat to live.

And conversations about life, death, and food are at the heart of our story this morning in John's gospel.

III

This winter, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel according to John, and to set the table for today's story, if you'll pardon the pun, it was near the time of the Passover – the Jewish festival that commemorates events we read about in the Hebrew bible, when God liberated

God's people from their slavery in Egypt, led them through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness, where God provided for their bodily needs with a substance called manna, which was like a fine, flaky bread.

John tells us near the time of the Passover, Jesus walked up a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and a huge crowd followed him.

And looking out at the crowd, Jesus said to his disciple Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?"

And Philip looked out at the sea of faces, and said to Jesus, "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

Then Andrew piped up and said to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus told the disciples to make everyone sit down on the grass – a crowd of about 5,000 people.

Then Jesus took the loaves in his hands, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated, as well as the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, Jesus told the disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." And when the disciples finished, there were twelve baskets filled with the leftovers.

The people were so impressed by what they had just witnessed that they started to come toward Jesus that they might take him by force to make him king. But when Jesus realized what they were up to, he slipped away by himself.

The next day, he caught up with his disciples again in the synagogue in the village of Capernaum, where he began to teach.

And that leads us to our text for this morning. The previous day, Jesus has fed 5,000 people with essentially a loaf of bread and a can of tuna.

And now Jesus is in the synagogue in Capernaum giving an extended discourse about the human condition and the need for nourishment. So listen now for a Word from God from John 6:35-59.

Jesus 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. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They 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'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It 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. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I 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."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Philip was telling the truth, of course. When Jesus asked him where he thought they might buy bread for 5,000 hungry people, the truth was that six months' worth of wages wouldn't come close to enough for everyone to have just a little taste. There was so much hunger spread out before them, and not nearly enough bread.

And of course we're familiar with what happened next. All four gospel writers tell their version of the story. Jesus told everyone to sit down. Then he took what was offered. He gave thanks for it. He broke it. And he gave it.

And there wasn't just enough for everyone to have a little taste. They ate until all were satisfied.

But it wasn't just that everyone was satisfied. There were twelve baskets of leftovers to boot.

And the next day, Jesus continues the conversation about life and death and bread. I am the bread of life, he says. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

IV

My sense, my friend, is that you're so very tired this morning. My sense is that you're so very hungry, so very thirsty. It's coming up on two years now that you've been living through this pandemic and all that has come with it. Everyone around you seems to be on edge about every little thing, and no one seems willing to give you the benefit of the doubt anything. There's so much need all around you, and you don't have nearly enough resources to even start to scratch it.

And so Jesus comes to you this morning, my friend, and he bids that you would sit down. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

And listen again to these words.

I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

I am the bread of life.

Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.

I am the bread of life.

This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

I am the bread of life.

All who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.

I am the bread of life.

Jesus bids that you would come, and sit, and know that you are loved. Come, and sit, and know that anyone who comes to him he will never drive away.

Come, and sit, and know that he is the bread of life, and he gives his very body and his very blood that you might eat. That you might drink. That you might know that you are enough, wholly and completely and just as you are. He bids that you might eat, not because you're worthy, but because you're hungry. He bids that you might drink, not because you're ready, but because you're thirsty. He bids that you might come to him, not because of what you've

done or not done or said or not said, but because of who he is – the bread of life. He bids that you would come, not because of who you are, but because of what he has done for you in his life, in his death, and in his resurrection.

You're so very tired. You're so very hungry. You're so very thirsty. So come. And sit. And be fed.

V

And once we've had our fill, once we've been satisfied, once we know that all have been served and there's been more than enough to go around, know that we will be sent.

We will be sent to feed the hungry. We will be sent to give drink to the thirsty. We will be sent to proclaim release to the captive and good news to the poor, to declare the year of the Lord's favor. We will be sent to name and rebuke the fallen powers and principalities of this present darkness. We will be sent to start dismantling structures that perpetuate of racism and poverty in our community. We will be sent to build vitality. We will be sent as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.

And we will get so very tired. And so very hungry. And so very thirsty. And truth be told, maybe a little bit hangry.

And so Jesus will invite us to come to him once again. To sit down. To breathe in. To breathe out. To be. To know that we are enough. To know that we are loved.

And to eat. And to drink. And to live.

I am the bread of life, Jesus says. Whoever comes to be will never be hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Thanks be to God. Amen.