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7/7/19--University Presbyterian Church
John 6:1-14, 22-35

THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE

Bread is the staff of life. Some form of bread supports life for much of the world's people. I love bread, almost any form of bread. I love sourdough bread and nutty seven grain bread. I love Indian naan bread and fresh made tortillas. What are your favorite kinds of bread?

Nowadays nutritionists tell us we eat too much bread, that we eat too many carbohydrates. So I try to cut back. But bread is my downfall. I find I crave bread, I'm hungry for bread.

That's why we come here today. We are hungry for bread. The form of bread we come to nourish ourselves with today is Christ, who tells us that *he* is the Bread of Life. I have told this story before with Ginna's permission but I share it again because it is such a beautiful story. It was Christmas Eve some years ago here at UPC and it came time in the service to celebrate communion. People were coming forward down the aisle to receive the sacrament and I saw Ginna guiding her cousin Susie forward to take communion. Many of us know Susie, who sometimes accompanies Ginna at church. Susie is blind and cognitively impaired and she blesses our congregation with the joy and gusto with which she sings the hymns. As Ginna was reaching out to take a piece off the loaf for herself and Susie, Susie cried out with a loud, booming voice, "Is it time for the bread, Ginna? Ginna, is it time for the bread?" We all broke into grins. Ginna tried to quiet Susie. "Yes, shhh," she whispered, "yes."

"O good!" exclaimed Susie. "Because I'm so *hungry* for it!"

No truer words could be spoken. We are all hungry for the bread. Sometimes we don't even know how hungry we are. No doubt you've heard those stories about pregnant women eating dirt

or chalk or other strange things because their bodies were deficient in some important minerals needed for the developing baby. The women didn't even know why they were craving such strange foods, but their bodies knew. Their bodies knew their need.

Our bodies, our souls, our spirits know we are hungry for something to sustain us. But we don't always know what that thing is. And so people will reach for all kinds of things to attempt to satisfy their hunger for love, for meaning, for acceptance, for joy. We reach for success and achievements, for wealth and possessions. We turn to alcohol or drugs to fill the emptiness. We take trips. We build houses. We shop. But we find that we are still hungry. We are not satisfied. And so we keep chasing fullness.

Yet there is a difference between being full and being satisfied. The story today from John's gospel reveals a people who were chasing fullness. Jesus performs a miracle--the feeding of the multitudes, which, by the way, is the only other miracle besides the Resurrection, that is found in all four of the gospel accounts. Jesus feeds the multitudes of people with just 5 loaves and 2 fish. And afterwards, even after the 5 thousand people ate their fill, there were 12 baskets of leftovers. The next day, the same crowd chases after Jesus, tracking him down on the other side of the sea. Jesus perceives that they haven't come because they believe in his message but because they want more bread. They want another miracle. "What can you do for us now?" is their attitude. They recall how their ancestors were given a special kind of bread in the wilderness with Moses, and they want Jesus to perform some similar miracle. But Jesus already has and the first one wasn't enough for them. They want more. They are driven by a need for fullness.

We live in a world that teaches us that in order to be satisfied we have to be full. But fullness does not guarantee satisfaction. Think about all the ways we can be full and not yet

satisfied. Our homes are full to the brim with possessions and yet, we are still not satisfied. We still want more. The world is fuller now than it ever has been with all kinds of ways to communicate with others near and far. And yet, even with all our forms of communication, we know less and less about what is true. And hostilities among peoples and nations still divide us. We fill our daily agendas with all kinds of activities--even worthy and charitable good works. But our busy schedules may leave us feeling empty, or lonely, or depleted from a sense of peace or wellbeing. Fullness does not promise satisfaction. In fact, the drive for fullness makes it hard to enjoy what we have. The drive for fullness turns us into consumers rather than enjoyers. The writer C.S. Lewis pondered, "Sometimes I wonder if all pleasures are not substitutes for joy."

When Jesus states, "I am the bread of life," he is offering something beyond fullness. He is offering something lasting, something complete. He is inviting us to stop chasing fullness and find satisfaction. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus is offering his very self to be the bread we consume in life. It is a eucharistic moment. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John's gospel does not have a Last Supper story. Instead, this moment, this feeding of the five thousand story followed by Jesus' discussion with the crowds when he declares, "I am the bread of life," this moment becomes John's equivalent of the Last Supper, where we are invited to nourish ourselves with Jesus himself. And by doing so, we will know satisfaction.

How? How will Jesus satisfy us? When we come to this Table to eat the bread and drink the cup, we do not claim that we will never know physical hunger again. For we shall. And we do not claim that life will be free from problems or heartache. We do not claim that we will know economic prosperity or that we will never get sick. But we do claim that God will satisfy our hunger. God does that by loving us unconditionally. God does that by forgiving and

accepting us even in our imperfect states. And God does that by giving us a way, a path to walk in life that involves loving and caring for others. This is what will satisfy our hunger--no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, no matter what hardships or struggles we face. We are loved. We are cherished. We are forgiven and embraced. And we are empowered to follow a path of meaning and purpose in life.

This is the bread that gives life to the world. This is the bread that endures. This is the bread that satisfies. And we pray, "Lord, give us this bread always."