

PROPER FOURTEEN, PENTECOST 12, YEAR B, AUGUST 11, 2024

Have you ever awakened from a nap and found yourself hungry but you don't know what you're hungry for? Or have you stood in front of the refrigerator with the door open staring at its contents wondering what you want to eat or what you want to make for dinner hoping that something will call to you? I've done that more times than I can count. I can also recall my mother yelling if you were standing in front of an open refrigerator door for any length of time trying to figure out what you wanted and her asking if we were trying to cool off the whole neighborhood.

It begs the question, what is it that we hunger for? In today's Gospel Jesus says he is the bread of life. It's such a familiar phrase that it's often overlooked as to its full impact. What did Jesus mean by saying he is this basic staple that we all have in our homes?

To get to an answer I think it is helpful to know the history of bread which is quite fascinating. Throughout recorded history and around the world, it has been an important part of many cultures' diet. It is one of the oldest human-made foods and plays an essential role in both religious rituals and secular culture.

The earliest bread may have been made from cattails and ferns, where these plants were pounded into a fine substance using primitive mortars found that date to nearly 30,000 years ago. The earliest wheat and barley-based breads developed from pre-agricultural and agricultural societies in the Middle East around 12,000 years ago and these earliest breads were likely unleavened.

Leavened bread was a bit of an accident. About 6,000 years ago in Egypt it is surmised that airborne yeasts landed in dough, causing it to rise or the mixture of flour, meal and water was left longer than usual on a warm day, and the yeasts that are naturally in the flour caused it to ferment before baking. When heated on an open flame or in an oven it continued to expand producing a light and airy bread. A portion of the dough was then kept to make the bread the next day which is how we make sourdough bread today.

With bread, everything changed. We learned how to turn grasses into food which human beings could eat, store, and transport. We learned how to cultivate grains and manage fields, how to harvest and mill and bake. We created agriculture. We developed entire communities - entire civilizations - devoted to the making of bread.

No wonder that in Arabic the words bread and life are the same word. And in cultures where the words are different, bread is so basic, that the term is often used for food in general, and later, when modern economics was born, we nicknamed even money, bread.

Bread became the staple of life. As a result, as bread became abundant and towns and cities and civilizations grew so did the need to control bread. Scarcity, not abundance became the by-word. Kings and pharaohs hoarded bread, distributing it at their whim, reaping fortunes through it and even oppressing their people by withholding it. And bread, the staff of life, became a commodity in a struggle for wealth and power that still exists today.

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life he is saying that he is the staple of life. He is telling us that there is an abundance of this life bread for everyone. There is no restrictions or bartering for the bread that he is. Jesus knew that we all share a

common, persistent, often insatiable hunger that goes far beyond the feelings of an empty stomach. It's a kind of hunger that follows us all our lives. And it's a hunger that can't be solved by staring into the refrigerator because it's not a hunger of the body. It's a hunger of the soul. And only by filling our lives with the bread of life, can we find satisfaction.

Writers throughout the ages have spoken about this hunger. Rabbi Harold Kushner, Henri Nouwin and Fred Buechner have all written books about this feeling inside of us, that we don't quite have everything we need, that we lack something to fill up this empty place inside of us, that we're missing some sort of nourishment that we can't quite identify. They all write that much of what we obtain in life is only temporarily satisfying. Just like midnight snacks, the stuff of life only fills us for a short time, and then, as Dean Hollerith of Washington Cathedral said, "we find ourselves staring into life's refrigerator, looking for something more, but not sure what that something is."

We have all at some point or another known the truth of the old saying that wanting is often better than having. We see something in life that we want something perhaps even crave, and we set out to get it. When we're young, it may be a car or a house. As we get older, it may be cravings for financial stability or social status.

Whatever it may be, sometimes it is the wanting of these things that gives us more pleasure than actually having them. We think these things will satisfy us and that once obtained they will make us truly happy and fill that empty place inside us. Only, we often discover that once we have obtained them, that they really made no fundamental difference at all. The satisfaction was only fleeting and if we examine the depths of our soul, for many of us we find it's not quite enough.

We are like small children playing with blocks and learning about shapes trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. We seek everything else to fill that empty space, everything that life has to offer, except the only thing that truly satisfies, the only thing that really assuages our hunger is the true bread of life. And the truth of the matter is this is an emptiness that can only be filled by God that Jesus shows us, and God's love, nothing else seems to fit that space or fill it up for very long.

Perhaps this is what the journey of faith is all about. Perhaps we must walk our own path and make our own decisions and learn what doesn't satisfy before we can ever really give ourselves and our lives to the one thing that does satisfy.

Professor Paul Strobel wrote in a great piece for the Christian Century, "When our lives are fed by Jesus's living bread, they begin to look like those lives described by Paul in Ephesians. When our lives are fed by the bread of life, then we attend to our words. We manage our anger. We work not only for our own needs but are mindful of others' needs and generous in responding to them. We encourage and forgive one another. We put away those things like bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. And we pattern our lives on the example of the bread of life, Jesus Christ our Lord."

This morning Jesus tells us that he is the bread of life that sustains us in the wilderness of life. His life and his teachings are the source of spiritual food that not only enables us to survive, but gives us the energy and the strength to live in service to others.

So, listen to that hunger in your soul. Its presence reminds us of our humanity and of our essential need for God. Seek to satisfy that hunger, but know that the God

who says, "I am the bread of life," is the only real nourishment we can ever have. And God's love is the only real food that will ever be able to fill our souls. Amen.