

I AM...The Bread of Life
John 6:31-35

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One early, cloudy morning when she was 46, Sara Miles walked into a church, ate a piece of bread and took a sip of wine. It was her first communion. She says it changed her life. Here are her words: "The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but real food - indeed, the bread of life." She was working as a journalist in San Francisco at the time, leading what she describes as "a thoroughly secular life." Something led her into the church that day. She now realizes it was hunger. Not physical hunger. Not only was Sara financially stable, but she had previously worked in a restaurant. She knew how to cook for herself and she could afford to. But there's hunger and then there's hunger.

Physical hunger brings out the worst in us, doesn't it? So much so that a new word has been coined: the word "hangry" - to describe the crabby anger many of us feel when we're physically hungry. It's almost as if panic sets in when we feel hungry, even though we know we are in no danger of starvation.

"Hangry" is what Jesus' followers feel in a story told at the beginning of the sixth chapter of John. In John's version of this story, crowds are following Jesus, because he has been performing healing miracles. Jesus sits at the top of a mountain with his disciples, and the crowds are pressing in on him. You get the feeling there's a real crowd mentality here, a sense that things could get out of hand. People are desperate to be near Jesus, to receive healing, and because he's achieved a celebrity status. The crowds have been there a while, and now they're getting hungry. Jesus says to Philip,

“What are we going to feed them?” And Philip panics. “You’re kidding, right Jesus? If we all worked for six months, we wouldn’t have enough money to buy food for this huge crowd!” Another disciple named Andrew says, “There’s a little boy over there with five small loaves of bread and two fish, but what’s that among five thousand people?” “Tell the people to be seated,” Jesus says. They do. The crowd sits down. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it and distributes it along the people. Everyone is fed, and then Jesus says, “Gather up the fragments so that nothing is lost,” and there are twelve baskets of leftovers.

The next day the whole region of Galilee is talking about the miracle of the loaves and the fish. Word spreads rapidly, and there are the crowds again, pushing in, getting close, wanting to be near this Jesus who can feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus looks at them and says, “I’m not here to perform miracles. I’m not a magician. I’m here to point you towards God, the one who feeds your deepest hunger. I’m here to show you a way of life that is truly satisfying.” “I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never thirst.” There is hunger, and there is hunger.

Sometimes we realize the difference. There are those days when you grab the first thing you see and put it in your mouth. At the end of the day you think about the junk you ate and how terrible it made you feel. And then there are other meals, simple meals, perhaps, but prepared with love. There are meals where you don’t really notice the food because the conversation was so rich, the time around the table was itself peppered with laughter. There are meals which leave us feeling empty and there are meals that satisfy.

There are times when we feel hungry, empty even, and nothing sounds good. You try eating, even something you usually love but that aching, gnawing hunger is still there.

“Maybe I need a drink.” “Shopping for new clothes might perk me up.” “I think I need to re-do a room in my house.” “I know, I really need a vacation.” And on and on it goes. We look everywhere, for something to buy, something to do, something to distract us. But if the hunger we feel is a spiritual hunger, only the bread of life will ultimately nourish us.

Sara Miles kept coming to church. Something happened to her the first time that communion wafer hit her tongue. She started learning about the way of life Jesus taught and lived. She started praying. She was drawn into the life of the community, step by step, deeper and deeper. And one day she received a notice in the mail from the Second Harvest Food Bank of San Francisco. “We need more neighborhood food pantries,” the flyer said. And she felt a call, undeniably clear, that her new purpose in life was to start a food pantry at her church. That was the year 2000. And now, every Friday at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church, the food pantry gives away six tons of food to the hungry in the neighborhood. The food is fresh, all are welcome, over a dozen languages are spoken, and - here’s the best part - the 400 families in need of food don’t have to go to the back door of the church and have someone hand them a bag. They’re able to “shop” for what they want in an atmosphere of dignity. And some of the food is distributed right from the altar, from the very spot where Sara herself was first fed.

As you might imagine, not all parishioners thought that having a food pantry operate out of the sanctuary was a great idea. People were afraid, “What will happen if we open up the building to all these poor people?” People thought it was crazy.

But Sara said to them, “This is what you do every week at Communion. You break bread and offer it to strangers. You fed me. I was a stranger. Now I’m going to feed other people. This is the same thing. I believe there actually is not much difference between

Communion and feeding strangers. And that's what I told people at the church. I allowed people to experience something that mattered to them—to acknowledge that they were hungry, too, and had something they wanted to give.” She's not speaking, of course, of physical hunger.

Jesus is becoming the bread of life for everyone at St. Gregory's. Some of the volunteers are extremely poor, some live on the streets. They show up every Friday morning and work for eight or ten hours because they're hungry to give something and connect with other people.

The long-time St. Gregory's parishioners have more money, but the desire to care for and feed other people doesn't belong to rich or poor. It's universal. Jesus is the bread of life for everyone.

When Jesus feeds us, not only are we satisfied, but there are leftovers, there is more still to share. Because God's love for us is abundant and overflowing.

Can it be that, for those of us who have never really known physical hunger, part of our spiritual hunger will only be satisfied when we are involved in making sure that everyone we know is fed? I believe it to be true. When we are involved in the kind of mission and outreach that feeds people, and clothes people, and advocates for justice for people, we are one step closer to feeling fed ourselves.

In our passage for today, Jesus, the Bread of Life, says to the disciples, “Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost.” Can you imagine that Jesus says this about the pieces of our lives that feel broken and useless?

I came across this bit of research this week. In a magazine called Good Health, dated April 1885, a woman named Mrs. Kellogg wrote an article entitled, "Some Ways to use Fragments." In it she says that not a crumb of good bread should ever be wasted. You can use bread fragments to make recipes such as...cream toast, snowflake toast, apple dessert, fruit pudding and custard pudding...I don't know what snowflake toast is, but I love the idea that in God's world, nothing is wasted.

Am I stretching our analogy too far, or do you think it's possible that God might use the fragments in our lives to create something of value. The pieces we want to throw out...the ones that feel broken...the parts that are tired and worn out...the parts of our lives that we might be ashamed of...God wants to help us piece our lives back together. So if you're tired of feeling broken, tired of feeling empty, tired of feeling TIRED, here these words: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

When we walk the way of life that Jesus taught and lived, when we practice our faith, when we feed the hungry and acknowledge our own hunger, we will gradually realize that more and more we feel that our deepest needs are being met and we have a reservoir of love to share with those around us.

Resources for this sermon:

Sara Miles tells her story in her book, [Take This Bread](#)

"Fragments" illustration from a sermon by the Rev. Christi Brown