



“Is the Bread of Heaven Gluten Free?”

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John 6:35, 41-51

Raise your hand if you agree with me: Calories ingested on vacation don't count. Right? It's our vacation and we get to eat all of the good foods guilt-free. Well, last week, my family went on vacation to Colorado. We drove the wide-open plains of Texas, passing tumbleweeds, mesas, and tall and intimidating turbines on sprawling wind farms. We crossed briefly into New Mexico, and made our way north. After being cooped up in the car for hours, the only thing we wanted to do was be outside. We hiked in the Rocky Mountains, climbed steep boulders to wade in some rushing waterfalls, and we even did a deep, dark tour of Cave of the Winds.

Whew! It was a good thing we did all of that hiking and climbing, because there is a famous eatery where I might have gone a little overboard. On our way out of Denver to drive back to Dallas, we had to make one last stop. Amanda pulled our old minivan into a metered spot on a busy street so I could jump out with \$20 in hand. I walked into the shop, slammed my \$20 down on the counter, and said, “Give me a Voodoo Dozen!” If you've been to Portland, Oregon or even Austin, Texas, you know exactly what that is. The Voodoo Dozen is a box of assorted donuts from Voodoo Donuts one of the most famous donut shops in the world. I trusted the lady behind the counter to pick whatever dozen donuts she wanted to put in the large pink box. And my trust paid off. I brought a heavy box back to the van filled with cream-filled donuts, donuts topped with Oreos, M&Ms, and Fruit Loops. Chocolate donuts, chocolate donuts covered in coconut, and cinnamon donuts. Man, that box was empty before we hit the Texas state line. Mmm-hmmm.

Wait, but I bet many of you wondering how I could've possibly eaten donuts since I am gluten-free. Well, after three years of misery not being able to eat regular donuts, pizza, and cookies, I finally had a surgical procedure done to definitively determine if I have Celiac Disease. The test came back negative for Celiac which meant I could finally eat gluten again. And this was great news because on my 40th birthday morning I celebrated by eating a donut for every decade I had been alive. Y'all, I REALLY missed donuts.

And I stopped being gluten-free at just the right time because for these past several weeks we have heard story after story about Jesus being the bread of life. So, if Jesus was the bread of life then as someone who used to be gluten-free and had a distant relationship with bread, it was easy to keep these Jesus stories at an arm's length for fear of what my family calls “glutamination.” I humorously saw someone make this statement on Facebook, “Y'all need to stop with the ‘bread is not good for you’ foolishness. Jesus did not say I am the broccoli of life. Nor did he say give us this day our daily kale. Stop. Jesus is life. Jesus is the bread of life. Bread is life.” Well, no kidding! For me, Jesus is the doughnut of life. That being said, I totally disagree with Jesus's words to Satan in the wilderness when he says, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every

word that comes from the mouth of God.” Nope. I could TOTALLY live on bread alone. But, alas, for those of us who are gluten-free or Celiac, bread doesn’t necessarily mean life.

But, bread did mean life to ancient peoples. And we have seen how important bread was to those walking with Jesus as the past four weeks have focused solely on bread. We have heard stories about taking nothing for your journey, not even bread – the thing that gives life and energy as you travel. Then we are shown a banquet in Herod’s palace where delicious breads were probably served to the guests right before John the Baptist’s head was served on a platter. Then we spent three weeks with the story of the feeding of the five thousand where Jesus turned a small amount of bread into a feast that fed the multitudes of people until they were filled and wanted no more. And then, finally, we’ve spent two weeks on Jesus calling himself the bread of life, the bread that can ease our hunger pains, the bread that can give us energy to do the work of Christ, the bread that can fill us to the brim with the goodness of God.

We have, at least I have, such a craving for bread. I feel when I eat bread that is fresh and good, I am invigorated and revived. And so, it is also when we consume this bread of life, when we live out Jesus’s immeasurable love for all people in the world, that we are changed. We become bread people. And we take our broken and baked and burned out lives and we multiply infinite love for all people, love that is new every morning. Infinite compassion for all kinds of people. Infinite justice and peace for everyone. The bread of life and energy of love needs to be living inside of us each and every day, showing the world we have been transformed by the living bread, Jesus.

But the listeners in our Gospel lesson for today didn’t quite understand. They didn’t understand that eternal life, as described in John, is much more about quality rather than quantity. Remember, John’s Gospel uncovers the mystical and divine life of Jesus in a present and real way among us... the Word became flesh. And we see that the words ‘eternal life’ are John’s favorite way of describing salvation and the sharing in the life and energy and sustenance of God here and now. For when we become bread people, we are spirit-filled and our transformed lives give life to others. The bread of heaven fills us and sustains us and, in turn, benefits the world.

But often, when we are bread people, living as Christ and offering God’s love to the world, it is controversial and many won’t believe it. The Jews, in this text, like Israel in the wilderness, murmured and grumbled about Jesus. Yet, this group was really only a certain group of Jews, for Jesus and the disciples were also Jews themselves. And this group of unbelieving Jews couldn’t imagine hearing that their hometown boy, this son of Joseph and Mary, this crusty young man that everyone remembered running through streets in the mud and getting into trouble with his friends, actually came down from heaven. These doubters, these people who wanted to stay away from the bread of life, found the pronouncement that Jesus came down from heaven hard to swallow.

But, I think, we need to be careful with the language in this scripture this morning. By saying “the Jews” or that some people are in and some people are out unless they eat the bread of life leads to exclusion, sectarianism and, in the case of the Gospel today, antisemitism. It might be easy to reject those people who disagree with us or to write off those we think are hopeless and unlikable. But the good news of this text is that Jesus is not simply a heavenly bread come down

from above. This heavenly bread is with us, transforming us, as we accept and partake in the communion of Christ. And we are changed into bread people, people who are transformed to spread the love of God in the world. The bread of heaven is not just for those of us who are carbohydrates. The bread of life is for gluten-free people, sick people, poor people, hurting people, black people, brown people, white people, gay people, straight people, angry people, perfect people, lonely people. The bread of heaven is for all people, because the bread of heaven is free.

But, if Jesus is the bread of life, which provides for our ultimate human needs, then why does it leave us so hungry. If Jesus is the bread of heaven, why is it so difficult to take a bite? Is “Jesus Bread” gluten-free? If so, I don’t blame you for not eating it because I know from personal experience that gluten-free bread isn’t tasty. So, what keeps us from eating? I am reminded of one Sunday when I was serving communion at my previous church. Because we had an open table, everyone was invited, even children. One of the mothers with three young and energetic boys came up to my tray and I placed a piece of bread in the youngest boy’s hand and said the words, “This is the bread of heaven.” He then looked up at me and said, “I want a BIG piece of Jesus.” That young child knew it was a feast. He was asking for what all of us have a hard time finding the words to request — more. More God, more love, more justice, more spiritual nourishment, more connections to the divine, more hope, more abundance, more bread that keeps us from hungering and more belief that keeps us from thirsting. I was taught by this boy that it doesn’t take much to become bread people. All we have to do is receive the freely-given feast. And the good news of the gospel is that we are all invited and we are all worthy of God’s love and grace.

And so, for those of us who partake in the bread of life, we are transformed, transformed into bread people. Rev. Juan Huertas, Pastor of Grace Community United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana says, “We cannot eat of this bread and forget. We cannot eat of this bread and walk away. We cannot eat of this bread and go on with life as usual. In fact, when we eat and when we drink, when we become part of the central activity and posture of our life together, the central reason for our gathering – we too are saying that God’s will for all of us... all of us... and all the world is to be restored, saved, healed, made whole! Instead we come to the ‘bread of life’ again and again with the promise that God will come, that the spirit we are calling will show up, that the claim that we make will be made present, that you and I will find ourselves part of a new reality, transformed into God’s own, pushed, propelled, into the reality of God’s kingdom in the world.”

Maybe if we spent more time becoming bread people, if we put our attention into becoming a community of the “bread of life,” if we took more seriously the reality of God’s own presence in our meal, we would spend less time and energy on things that separate us, that exclude others, that close our doors, and that question God’s image in others. And when that happens and we follow Jesus, the bread of heaven, we are changed and transformed into bread people – living, thriving, nourishing bread people that can impact the world. For when we are suffering and sad, abandoned and alone, God’s only hands for us might be the hands of others, the hands that knead, and mold, and break, and bake, and form us. Jesus might be the bread of heaven but we, each one of us, must learn to be bread for the world. We are the bread of life here and now.

We are bread people, people who must prepare ourselves to be consumed... consumed by love, and care, and justice, and hope. We must be bread people, exhausting ourselves doing acts of kindness and mercy. We must be bread people, building houses and repairing families. We must be bread people, filling the souls of those who are hopeless and without sustenance. We must be bread people, multiplying goodness and grace among all those who hunger for companionship and peace. We must be bread people, people that are consumed. And to be consumed bread people, people who follow the Living Bread, we must become what we eat, as Jesus says. We must become what we eat and be the hands and feet and very life of Jesus in the world. For Jesus says, unless we “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, we have no life in us.” We must become bread people.

Rev. Andrew Prior says, “We can all eat. There is almost always manna in the wilderness, unless we hoard and steal and kill. But life that is eternal, that has a quality beyond mere biological persistence, that is more than selfish genes... that life comes only when we allow ourselves to be consumed.” Are we bread? Are we consumed by the passion and purpose and power of Jesus to change the world, to be living bread... not bread that grows old and stale? If so, we must not simply be like our ancestors that ate manna in the wilderness and died. We must be as Jesus was, as living, breathing, saving, life-changing, life-giving bread.

As living bread, we must not simply donate groceries to North Dallas Share Ministries to put food in people’s stomachs. We must also change the systems that cause people to have low wages, expensive healthcare, and unaffordable houses which in turn causes them to be hungry. As living bread, we must not simply bail one person out of jail for a minor offense. We must also change the laws that cause people of color to be enslaved in the money-making machine of incarceration. As living bread, we must not simply quote our barely-cracked Bibles that say ‘welcome the stranger.’ We must work to change laws that trap immigrants seeking homes in the red tape of citizenship for countless years. We must not simply be manna in the wilderness which needs to be eaten every morning because it decays and spoils at night. We need to be bread people, living bread people, the bread for the world people that bring Jesus’s all-loving, all-inclusive, all-embracing, and all-encompassing change.

And so, Jesus offers us today the image of ordinary bread as a way to better understand the divine work in which we must participate. And that is how God always seems to work, isn’t it? God uses fairly ordinary means to transform the world... even us, bread people. So, is the Bread of Heaven gluten-free? Probably not. But is the Bread of Heaven free to all? Yes, yes it is.

Amen.