

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2015 12B
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy MD

You might, if you are the sort of person who likes the world to be orderly, have noticed that something has changed in the service this week. For most of the year we have been reading from Mark's gospel – more or less in order when the festival seasons don't demand something else, but here we are, on an ordinary Sunday, reading from John's gospel instead. And we'll be doing that for a while to come. There is a method to this. Our cycle of readings, what we call the lectionary, is a three-year cycle, and each year focuses on one of the gospels, but we have four gospels. John's gospel is the outlier – it's quite different in style and content from the other three, and it gets plugged in here and there in the lectionary – most noticeably during Eastertide, but also in big chunks during Mark's year because Mark's gospel, being the shortest, doesn't fill a whole year in the cycle. So today, just when the story of the feeding of the multitude shows up in Mark, we jump to John's version of the same event, and then through the month of August we will read the rest of what is known as John's "bread discourse," in which Jesus stays focused on both physical and metaphorical bread for the rest of the chapter. It's going to be all bread, all the time, until you are tired of bread. But, of course, no one ever really gets tired of bread. We can get tired of the kind of mostly-air sandwich bread that was the staple of most of our childhood

lunchboxes, but real bread – from the aroma as it bakes, to the crispy yet elastic crust, to the taste and texture itself, is almost magical in its ability to attract and to satisfy. Bread is basic food in almost every culture, our cheapest luxury, our most pleasurable necessity. As Robert Browning said. “If thou tastest a crust of bread, thou tastest all the stars and all the heavens.”

Familiar things, basic things, make the best metaphors; the most powerful symbols, so it’s no wonder that bread is not only basic to our life, community and diet, but also central to our culture, our symbols, our faith.

Bread and dough are slang for money. The one who provides for her family is the “bread-winner.” “Our daily bread” is code for “everything we need.” Bread is the traditional housewarming gift. “Breaking bread” means sharing a meal. A nation’s agriculturally productive region is its “breadbasket.” And something new and useful is “the greatest thing since sliced bread.”

Metaphorically, we cast our bread on the waters and appease the masses with bread and circuses and know which side our bread is buttered on, and that bread always falls buttered side down, and when we don’t get everything we want, it’s “half a loaf” that’s better than none.

So when Jesus breaks and blesses and shares bread, he is doing something both simple and profound – using the most familiar of things to touch the deepest wells of our common experience and the deepest longings of our heart.

This story of the breaking of the bread and sharing it with the multitude and the subsequent discourse on bread from heaven and Jesus as the bread of life is the communion story in John's gospel – his version of the Last Supper tells of foot-washing, not bread-breaking – and in some ways it's a richer communion story than the one we know the best. It starts with a miracle, which is kind of cool, but it is, as C. S. Lewis points out in his book *Miracles*, a pretty ordinary kind of miracle. Taking a small amount of food and turning it into something that can feed a whole village is exactly the sort of miracle that farmers do all the time. Jesus does it a bit faster of course, but maybe Jesus' flashy harvest is best meant to remind us of the commonplace miracle of seeds and soil and rains that does give us our daily bread. As a communion story, what makes it so rich is that the lived experience of the people Jesus feeds is the essence of the reign of God – that there is more than enough for everyone. People come to Jesus, physically and spiritually hungry, and they find that they are fed, bodies and souls, and when they have been fed, (and this is the key to John's version of the feeding miracle) they have the means to feed others.

That is the essence of the community that Jesus calls his followers to form – what he calls “the reign of God.” We gather together to be fed by Jesus, who calls himself the Bread of Life, and when we have been fed, we find that we have the means to feed others.

To put it another way, if Jesus is the Bread of Life, and we are the Body of Christ, then we too are the Bread of Life, and feeding the physical and spiritual hunger of the world is our calling and our purpose.

So how do we do that? How do we be that? What do we have that is food for the world?

Actual food, for one thing. We (collectively speaking, for I know this is not true for everyone) have plenty of it. We can share more of what we have and waste less of what we use. I'm sure that it wouldn't take very long in my household of two teenagers to fill up twelve baskets with good food that is discarded, half eaten, not put back in the refrigerator, or left on the back shelf of the fridge until it spoils. We can eat more food that is lower on the food chain so that our agricultural bread-baskets can produce food for more people. We can accompany our food-drive canned goods with a money donation to the food bank, which can buy more food with each of our dollars than any of us can.

And we can incline our hearts more towards being bread for the world by feeding one another as well. Go out of your way to share a meal with friends, family and people you would like to know better. Invite more often, and say yes more often to the invitations you receive. You can be Bread for the World by breaking bread with the world.

And as for the spiritual side of it, first, don't forget that the actual food can be spiritual food as well. As Gandhi said, "There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

But beyond that, what do you have to feed the spiritual hunger of the world?

Although it may not seem that way to you, you already have much – more than enough. You have, in the first place, whatever has fed you. The stories, experiences, memorable quotations, well-loved songs, friendly gestures, kind words, surprising insights, and inner stillness that have sustained you, gotten you over bad times, gave voice to your joy, strengthened the bonds of your friendships, spared you troubles you anticipated and helped you through ones you didn't – all that spiritual bread is still yours to give away even though you have fed on it, and like Jesus' loaves and fishes, there is more, not less of it each time it is shared and tasted.

You have your stories to share – the experiences of joy, the events that brought wisdom, the encounters that surprised and transformed – but even more importantly, you have the vast, unharvested fields of other people's stories to share by the simple act of saying, "tell me more." And it may be that by listening truly, deeply and honestly to other people's stories you can be bread for them more profoundly than by anything you can give them, material or metaphorical. And that's yet another reason to invite more people to break bread with you.

Finally, by ourselves, we are more like the seed and less like the loaf – it is in community that we can most truly be bread for the world. The oldest communion prayer that has come down to us, from a church manual called the *Didache*, like John’s Gospel, does not contain an account of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples and saying “This is my body.” But it does say, “as this bread, once broken and scattered on the hillside is gathered together into one loaf, so let your church, scattered to the four corners of the earth, be gathered together into one kingdom.”

We are the Bread of Life. As a community, we can feed the physical and spiritual hunger of the world far more effectively than any of us can do by ourselves. Not only do we have more to share, more ears to hear, more wisdom to feed on, but it is certain that if we work together to feed the hungry world, we will also be fed, and at the end of the meal, there will be plenty left to feed even more.

Amen.