



“The Bread of Life”  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
Scripture: John 6:24-35  
August 2, 2009

A colleague remembers a hospital visit with a woman from his congregation prior to her surgery. This was a few years ago, when they checked you into a room the day before an operation. “She had never been in the hospital before and the procedure she was facing was life threatening. When the minister walked into her room she was a nervous wreck. She started crying and immediately begged him to pray with her, which he did. Following the prayer, he chatted with her, and as they talked he noticed that next to her bed there was a stack of books and magazines. He scanned the titles: *True Love, Glamour, Hollywood Today*, stories about various movie stars and celebrities. She had a large stack of them in her room, and she was a wreck. The pastor realized there was not one single calorie in that whole stack to help her through her experience. She had no place to dip down into a spiritual reservoir and come up with something – a word, a phrase, a thought, a memory, a person. She was empty.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of John reminds us that we are more than physical beings; for life to be rich and whole, secure and hopeful, we need to pay attention to matters of the soul.

Jesus recognized the two hungers: physical and spiritual. Hunger because our stomach is empty and hunger because our soul is empty. In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus addresses both hungers. When the chapter opens, Jesus has 5,000 famished people on his hands and he feeds them with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. After quenching their physical hunger, Jesus heads to the other side of the Sea of Tiberias. However, the next day, the crowds pursue him. Perhaps it is because they want another free meal; or perhaps it is because they can see that he is someone special – someone sent from God – and they want to know what other wonders he might perform.

Jesus knew that the people needed more than a miracle. Feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread will certainly impress. Turning water into wine will make people marvel. But Jesus knew that people need more than amazing feats to carry them through their lives. They need to satisfy the deep hungers of the soul. So Jesus used the occasion to remind the people that physical hunger is not the only hunger that gnaws at us. There is a deeper hunger that fish and loaves cannot satisfy.

He said to the people, “The Bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And the people reply, “Sir, give us this bread always.” And then Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.”

Jesus presents himself as the bread for our souls. He is what we need to satisfy our cravings. What are those internal aches that make us aware of our emptiness?

For the woman facing surgery, it was fear. She yearned for the security of knowing she was not alone, and that whatever the outcome, God would be with her. She lacked the faith that nothing in life or death could separate her from God's love.

For many, the hunger is for meaning. We want to know that our lives have a purpose that is grander than ourselves. We want to know that what we do matters.

Others of us know there is a void within, but don't understand what we are craving and we attempt to satisfy our appetite with artificial substitutes: material possessions, alcohol, affairs, sports, entertainment. One writer says, "We careen from one fix to another, trying to stay just ahead and out of sight of the specter of emptiness. When someone or something comes along that promises more, we rush to get in line, credit card in hand. When the latest hobby, fantasy, addiction, or self-deception lets us down, we eagerly scan the horizon for another substitute, ready to embrace anything that will convince us that we are not, as Walker Percy writes, 'lost in the cosmos'."<sup>2</sup>

There is a temptation to nail down once and for all precisely what Jesus meant when he called himself the Bread of Life; we are tempted to reduce all that it means to call Jesus the Bread of Life to a handful of succinct sentences that we can write down like a creed. However, that should never be our goal. What it means to call Jesus the Bread of Life should be an ever-expanding vision. When we affirm Christ as the Bread of Life, are we saying that he is the one who shows us the path to a rich life? Yes, but more. Are we saying that Christ gives us strength in difficult times? Yes, but more. Are we saying that Christ forgives us when we make a mess of things or when we fail to do what is right? Yes, but more. Are we saying that Christ gives us courage to stand up for justice and to work for peace? Yes, but more. Are we saying that Christ gives us hope for a new day even when we can see nothing but darkness? Yes, but more!

To call Jesus the Bread of Life who nourishes our souls is to declare that Jesus is God with us and God within us. Augustine said that our souls are restless until they rest in God. Theologian Henri Nouwen says that human beings not only yearn to belong to God, but God yearns to belong to us. He suggests that perhaps God's heart is restless until God rests in us.

Nouwen says that ever since the creation of the first human beings, God has been crying out "I created you, I gave you all my love, I guided you, offered you my support, promised you the fulfillment of your hearts' desires: where are you, where is your response, where is your love? What else must I do to make you love me? I won't give up, I will keep trying. One day, you will discover how I long for your love!"<sup>3</sup>

A pastor was having coffee with a woman in his congregation and they were talking about various matters, and at one point the pastor asked, "How are things with your family?" She replied, "Well, not so great. Our son, who is a senior in high school, came back home last week."

"Oh," he said, "I didn't know he had been away."

Her voice trembled. "He ran away. He was gone for months and we didn't know where he was. He told us he was never coming back. Then, last Wednesday night my husband and I were sitting at the table having supper and the door bell rang. I got up to go to the door and then there was this hard banging on the door. I opened it up and our son stormed in. He didn't say 'Hello,' he didn't say 'I'm sorry,' he didn't say 'I missed you,' he was just spewing profanity and screaming at us from the top of his lungs. I said, 'We're having supper, do you want to sit at

the table with us?' And he just turned the air blue with his profanity and went stomping down the hall to his room. He went in, slammed the door and locked it."

"My husband got up from the table, did not say a word, just went into the den and poured himself a drink. That's his way of dealing with something like this."

"I went to our son's bedroom door and asked if I could come in. Once again he cut loose with a string of profanity, calling me every awful name he could imagine. And so I went out to the garage, to my husband's workbench where he has all sizes of hammers. I found the biggest one and I carried it back to the door of our son's room. I said once more, 'May I come in?' And he told me to go to hell."

"So, I took that hammer and started beating on the door knob until I shattered it. Then I shoved the door open and went into his room. He was lying there on the bed, his eyes wide open and frightened to death. I got him right under the neck and I slammed him against the wall and I said, 'I want you to know that I went through labor for you! And I will never, ever give you up!'"<sup>4</sup>

To call Jesus the Bread of Life is to recognize God as the great cosmic Lover, who with the same passion as that mother, will never give up on us.

At this moment in your life, is God trying to beat down the door you're hiding behind? You can try to fill yourself with things that do not last, or you can gather with other followers of Christ for worship. You can turn a deaf ear to the whispers of God, or you can read and reflect on the Scriptures. You can blame God for all of your troubles, or you can spend time with God in prayer. You can put up a wall and try to ignore God, or you can share God's love with people who are hurting. You can do your very best to run away from God, or you can come to the table where your soul will be nourished by the Bread of Life.

#### NOTES

1. Mike Graves and Richard Ward, *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 30.
2. G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., "Pastoral Implications," in *Lectionary Homiletics*, August – September 2009, p.9.
3. Henri Nouwen, *With burning Hearts*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p.69.
4. From a sermon by Ted Wardlaw at the Montreat Worship and Music Conference at the Montreat Conference Center, June 22-28, 2008.