

August 1, 2021, 10th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, Psalm 78:23-39
Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35

"Bread We Didn't Even Know We Needed"

[<https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2021/07/15/hotdish-bnh-m-and-the-foods-that-connect-us-to-family-and-culture>.
<https://www.amazon.com/What-We-Hunger-Refugee-Immigrant/dp/1681341972>. Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, Deep Hungers posted on July 25, 2021 for August 1, 2021. Sleeping with Bread: Holding what gives you life, by Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn, and Sheila Fabricant Linn.]

Grace and peace, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

I listened to an interview a couple weeks ago about the book

What We Hunger For: Refugee and Immigrant Stories about Food and Family.

The Interview included a conversation with one of the contributors, Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn (Anwah Win). She's a St. Paul writer, and the daughter of Vietnamese parents.

Ánh-Hoa (Anwah) described growing up distancing herself from the food her parents cooked and served:
the strong smells, the rich tastes of their homeland.

As a teen she'd opt to prepare her own meals.

Steak-umm sandwiches and Banquet brand frozen fried chicken were favorites.

But then she traveled 1,500 miles away for college in the Bay Area and endured wrenching homesickness.

Her brother, also a student in the area, took her to Oakland's Chinatown.

She said, "I didn't realize I missed certain smells and tastes and food experiences until I had a bowl of Pho."

Afterward, in the back seat of her brother's car, she found herself full of emotion,

"something hit some tender piece of my soul."

And then she continued: "It was almost like I was meeting my parents.

Going to these restaurants, and eating this food

was holding me in a way that I hadn't known that I'd needed."

Let me say that again: "It was holding me in a way that I hadn't known that I needed."

This is week two of five,:

the second of five consecutive weeks where our reading

follows through a span of John's Gospel.

Last Sunday some of you were part of wondering and noticing.

We explored the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 on the hillside:

the hunger,

the boy,

the five loaves and the two fish,

the dis-believing questions from the disciples, send them away, Jesus, there isn't enough,

and then Jesus' miracle sign: bread to fill everyone, twelve baskets left over.

We're left to wonder: Is the miracle the bounty that Jesus created from so little?

Or could it be that with Jesus the crowd reached into their cloaks for morsels they'd squirreled away?

Or perhaps the miracle is how Jesus feeds our hunger, our deep hunger?

Last week we heard the narrative, the story, of the feeding.

Now it's the next day, and the people have tromped and boated all over looking for Jesus,

because they are hungry again,

trying to find this One who filled them in a way they *hadn't known they'd needed*.

So begins a long and winding conversation about what happened on that hillside yesterday.

Like a conversation with a rabbi, back and forth, they ask questions and Jesus guides them

deeper and deeper into *just what he means*.

That said, I'll be honest: "just what he means" is definitely an overstatement.

This passage is confusing.

It's difficult to follow and full of gaps.

It's tweaked with irony, with questions that Jesus (perhaps intentionally) doesn't answer,

with statements that just don't seem to follow.

What do I make of this passage?

I think Jesus is saying to them, "Remember that Manna in the wilderness?

Moses often gets credit for it, but truly, truly, it didn't stop...

That Manna is still coming, and it is me," Jesus says.

"It is me, I am the Manna, I am the Bread of Life."

Of course the Manna was meant to sustain them:

day by day they received it, it quelled their hunger.

In daily waiting for it,

daily receiving it, not too much, not too little, enough, enough for today,

with Manna God created relationship.

Talk attachment parenting, talk adoption, talk dog parenting,

and you'll hear an awful lot about food and relationship.

Manna taught them to trust.

Okay, take it home: Manna, bread, teaches us to trust,

to trust that we'll get what we need,

that Jesus will provide.

Really, dear ones, Jesus is teaching us to trust that in a deep way,

like Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn (Anwah Win), ***we'll get what we didn't even know that we needed.***

There's a tension within this passage between physical food and the heavenly food,

the food that endures, Jesus calls it.

Let me touch on both this morning.

The physical food first:

for sometimes there's been scuttle in the church that it's wrong to talk about physical hunger,
that it is less holy, less sacred.

Jesus is inviting the crowd to get in touch with their deeper hunger,

but he doesn't ignore their physical hunger.

They were poor, food was scarce, of course they and their families were hungry for physical bread.

They needed to eat.

Debie Thomas writes, "Jesus tends to their bodily needs first, without reservation or preconditions.

But he doesn't stop there."

This morning at the end of worship we'll take a noisy offering.

The coins and bills we give today are for Every Meal.

That's the new name for The Sheridan Story.

For families who sign up, food is sent home from school on Fridays,

enough for the weekend, culturally appropriate.

With University Baptist, First Congregational Church and others in our neighborhood,

we support Marcy Open School.

While the kids are out of the room, volunteers track down the correct cubbies,

and nestle food bags into the students' backpacks.

The program has adapted and grown during COVID,

but Every Meal aims to be back in the school in September.

This morning, too, we're writing letters to our Senators and Representatives for Bread for the World.

Bruce Eldevik has all the materials prepared at the tables in the back.

There are templates so it's easy, paper and pens, stamps and envelopes.

We're asking these leaders to increase US funding for global nutrition programs.

We're encouraging them to expand the child tax credit to make it permanent and available to all children

regardless of immigration status.

These letters matter; this form of advocacy has a huge impact.

When Bread for the World does the math, each letter we write nudging congregational leaders generates more than \$10,000 in funding.

So we sit down and write two letters, that's \$20,000 that goes to nutrition, to feeding, to bread.

3 letters, that's \$30,000, you get the idea.

Most of us can't give that kind of money to feed people,

but by writing letters with Bread for the World to advocate for funding... our impact is multiplied.

Jesus the bread of life fed people physical bread, and now we are part of this feeding,

But Jesus doesn't stop there.

Like Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn (Anwah Win) experienced in her college days,

connecting to her identity, her family,

Jesus feeds the hungers that we don't even know we have.

There's a story that's told in the book Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life.

This has roots in Victor Frankl's stories from the Holocaust.

Children who'd lost every thing, lost every one—they were cared for during the war by others.

When they'd have trouble falling asleep, they were given a crust of bread, to hold.

They'd hold that bread like young ones hold their blankie, clutching the bread,

for it was a very tangible reminder that they'd eaten today and they'd eat again tomorrow.

The book Sleeping With Bread lifts up an Ignatian spiritual practice.

In this practice, each evening, very briefly, prayerfully, one considers their "bread," naming

What is your consolation, for what are you most grateful?—that is your bread

And what is your desolation, for what are you least grateful?

It's a simple, profound practice of discernment—holding on to what gives you life, sleeping with bread.

Dear ones, what is your bread?

What bread is Jesus the Bread of Life giving you?

The earth is burning.

The virus is spreading.

The struggles of mental health are real.

Change is happening, but slowly, and we see justice in fits and starts.

This is hard, friends, really hard, there is much that depletes, and challenges aplenty.

So what is your bread? This week, today, what is the bread you are holding?

Take a moment to get in touch with your bread.

What is your hunger, your need that you may not even fully know?

And how is God providing for you? (pause)

Our family is going through some challenges.

Even when things feel hard, just much,

when I step back, it's clear that we're receiving bread that endures.

Sometimes that's the empathy of friends or the presence of family,

sometimes it's a fast track to needed resources,

often it's the blessing of sleep,

mostly it's grace.

It's an assurance that we don't have to do this all right or have it all figured out,

and that God, our bread, is sustaining us.

That's the bread that I'm clutching.

Dear ones,

May Jesus Christ be the bread that you hold in the day and through the night.

May our Bread of Life shower you with manna, with grace.

May the bread that endures meet your hunger, even the hunger you don't recognize, and

and may it inspire you to feed your neighbors. Amen.