

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
The Rev. Kirk Hall
August 5, 2012

Comfort Food
Exodus 16:1-5; 9-15
John 6:25-35

Today's second reading comes from the sixth chapter of the Gospel According to John. From the beginning of the Gospel, after the writer describes Jesus as "the Word made flesh," he describes what this means through these "signs" (or miracles) and follows them with dialogue through which Jesus tries to teach, to clarify his identity.

Often, these encounters end with Jesus' well-known "I am" confessions. Twenty-six times in the Gospel according to John we hear Jesus professing "I am;" "I am the light...I am the vine...I am the way and the truth and the life."¹

One of the best known "signs" falls just before our reading today, when Jesus goes up on a hill, takes five loaves of bread and two fish and feeds 5,000 people. When the people saw what he had done, they wanted to take him by force and make him their king. So Jesus left that place and went across the sea. In today's reading, after the crowds have chased him down, Jesus clarifies who he *really* is. ***Please read John 6:25-35.***

After I graduated from college, I moved back to Charlotte to work. Living out on our own, some friends of mine (as a way to stay connected) used to meet each Friday morning for breakfast. So we decided to meet over at Anderson's Restaurant before work. On one of these mornings we got into this conversation about what makes a good "breakfast spot."

One of my buddies thought that "a sign" of a great breakfast joint was not the coffee, but the mug that it came in. If the mug was heavy – one of those old, thick, heavy mugs that, if you dropped, would break the floor - (they don't hold but about three ounces of coffee) but it felt good in your hand and the waitress would come by to fill it up, you felt like you were at home, being taken care of. That would make a good breakfast spot.

Another friend picked up from there and said, no, the real sign of a good breakfast place is how the waitress addresses you. If she called you "hon" or "sweetie" or "sugar" you knew the meal was made with love.

For me, it was the grits. Not if they were good, but if they had them. Not sure why. Grits are strange, if you think about it. What is it? I mean, what is a "grit" anyway? But it never really seemed to matter because if the

breakfast place had grits the meal was complete. To me, the grits made it a *real* breakfast, the way that Mom used make it back then, with the smells of home and the way it was when I didn't need to go out for breakfast.

When we were younger, my mother would make these breakfasts on special occasions – typically on Saturday mornings. We would wake up to the smells throughout the house that led us to the kitchen to find this great spread that just fell from heaven before us. Mornings like that typically meant that no one was in a hurry because these meals took time to eat and everyone would just relax and enjoy the food and be together – a family at home. It wasn't just for the morning either. Every once in a while, we would come home from school and Mom would have made breakfast for dinner – the eggs and the grits, the bacon, the biscuits. It was one of those meals where the world made sense, ***where we knew that we were loved and taken care of and provided for.***

That's why it's called comfort food. Now, long after I've left home, it still has the power to take me back to that once upon a time, to the way things used to be, when the world made sense. There is power in it.

I've seen the healthiest of people attack the most unhealthy meatloaf, for example, and as they slop it up, there is this look of peace on their face as the conversation always goes back to how "Mom used to make the best meat loaf" or how "granddad used to make the best biscuits and gravy," or "aunt Maggie made the best mac and cheese." It's comfort food. It takes us back – it reconnects us to someone, something bigger than the meal in front of us.

So it makes sense that when the crowds saw Jesus multiply the loaves and feed the multitudes, they followed him because they saw for themselves that he could serve them their comfort food.

In the first lesson that Katherine just read, we hear the story of way back when the Israelites had just "moved out on their own" (if you will) – a month and a half after they had left Egypt and they grew uncertain and hungry. Just when they started to "complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness," saying that they would rather go back to captivity because at least then they knew they were going eat. So God responds by raining bread down from heaven.

Each morning when they woke up, scripture tells us, they would find before them this "fine flaky substance" that they could gather and eat for nourishment. They didn't even know what it was so they called it "manna" which literally means, "what is it?"

But it never really seemed to matter because it was the bread that the Lord gave them to eat, so they ate it - each morning for 40 years - fourteen thousand six hundred days – each and every morning they would they would wake up and see this flaky, "What is it?" and (whatever it was) it told them that ***someone made their breakfast with love, someone was taking care of them, providing for them.***

And when the forty years was over and they found the Land of plenty, they didn't eat manna everyday but by God's command, they kept a jar of that manna with the tablets of the Law "as an everlasting reminder of their dependence on God, who gave them each day their daily bread."²

Faithful to that memory, when the crowds saw Jesus provide food for 5,000 people on a desolate hillside, they looked right through him to the bread of the past. They wanted him to lead like Moses did, to provide the bread that reminded them of God's presence, God's provision, of God's protection of so long ago.

So after they chase Jesus down on the other side of the sea, Jesus clarifies their hungers, "Very truly, I tell you," he said to them, "you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." The grumbling bellies push on by looking back.

'What are you going to do for us?' They said, "What are you going to give us so that we may see and believe. Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

So Jesus shifts the relationship with the past to free them from the past, to tell them on no uncertain terms that bread is just bread. And he walks them to the source of all bread, "Very truly I tell you, it was not Moses who *gave* you the bread from heaven [in the past], but it is my Father who *gives* you [right now] the true bread from heaven."

As the crowds were looking back to days past to find their comfort, Jesus was announcing that the source of that comfort, the one who loved and cared and provided for them was living and breathing, standing as close as this peasant from Nazareth. And all they had to do was to shift their sights from the bread of the past to the one in their presence. "*Believe* in him who [God] has sent." Believe that the one who provided back then (who gave you that bread for 40 years) is standing right in front of you, and promises to be with you until then end of the age. Trust in the source of that manna, not the manna, itself. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

I don't think this is so strange – the followers looking for a sign. Something to connect them to the past. I think we do this in the church as well, don't we? Some sort of ecclesiastical "comfort food." I am sure we can all gather and think about what makes a "good church" and we would get just as many answers as what makes a good breakfast joint. To some it is the old hymns, to some it is saying the Apostle's Creed every Sunday, to others it's good preaching, the mission ministry, a specific order of worship – that's what makes a good church.

We seek these things out because, more often than not, those are the things in which we find comfort – the things that we had in the past, when we were younger (maybe at other churches, maybe here) those vessels of grace that take us back to that once upon a time, when the world made sense, ***where we knew that we were loved and taken care of and provided for.***

And that is what makes them sacred - so for them we give thanks and praise. But in the midst of that memory, Jesus clarifies our hungers to free us from the past, to tell us on no uncertain terms that bread is just bread and that the source of all bread is with us even to the end of the age.

Now that our interim Senior Minister Roland and his wife Jane have moved on and we approach the time of new pastoral leadership, there have been, even over the past week, several conversations about what we expect – what kind of bread we hope to have - what this new leadership, what this church will need to provide.

Some say good sermons, a strong youth program, renewed fellowship, some say it is to speak to the issues while other say to remain a “non-issues church.” Some hope for a senior *pastor* who can provide support for the mission or teach great classes; who can bring back the old hymns or maybe different styles of worship. Others aren’t too worried, now that we know his gender. And we say this with gratitude because all of these are the very vessels, the very bread by which God let us know that we were loved and provided for and protected – and they give us comfort - but they do not give us life. Grits are just grits – a mug is just a mug. But the source of life, the very one who loved and cared and provided for us in the past is living and breathing, standing as close as the person beside you walking with us into the future. So “what must we do to perform the work of God?” “*Believe* in him who [God] has sent.” Believe that the one who provided back then keeps his promise to be with us until then end of the age, loving, protecting, pouring out life. And give thanks. Give thanks because whatever happens tomorrow, God is already there, calling us forward, waiting to rain down nourishment in new and wonderful ways that we can’t even imagine – all we have to do is to believe and even that is the work of God.

So as we come to the table, we come with gratitude for the past, assurance in the present and hope that what God provides does not perish, but endures for eternal life.

¹“light 10:7, 9, “door”; 10:11, 14, “shepherd”; 11:25, “resurrection and life”; 14:6, “way, truth, life”; 15:1, 5, “vine”; 4:46; 8:28, 58; 13:19; 18:5. See Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock’s, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press) 2004. p. 309.

² Taylor, Barbara-Brown, *Bread of Angels*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.). 1997, p. 9.