

Tracy Daub
8/5/18-University Presbyterian Church
John 6:1-15, 24-35

THE JESUS DIET

The South Beach diet, the Atkins diet, the Scarsdale diet, the Mediterranean diet, the Paleo diet. No doubt you have heard of at least a few of these fad diets. Maybe you've even tried one or more of them. They each have carefully constructed rules and guidelines about what you can eat to be healthy and lose weight.

Today, scripture gives us a new diet: the Jesus diet. The Jesus diet centers around bread. All those other diets kick bread off the menu--too many carbs. But not Jesus. Jesus makes bread the very center of his diet. After all, some form of bread is the staff of life for much of the world's people. Bread keeps people alive. And life is what Jesus wants to give people. Abundant life.

So Jesus feed people bread. All kinds of bread--bread for the body and bread for the soul. Some Christians have concerned themselves almost exclusively with preaching and teaching about the bread Jesus offers our souls, and spend their energies trying to convert people, tell them about Jesus, save their souls. Meanwhile, people in their own communities and across the world are starving, in need of real food for themselves or their families. And some Christians have concerned themselves with focusing on feeding people's bodies, but neglect to feed themselves or anyone else the good news of Jesus' love. They become spiritually malnourished.

But no one can accuse Jesus of doing either of those extremes. Jesus fed people's bodies. Every gospel attests to his concern with people's real bodily needs. And Jesus fed people's souls with a message that offered genuine life.

Today's scripture shows us Jesus doing both: feeding bodies and feeding souls.

First Jesus feeds the multitudes of people in what is an astonishing miracle. Five thousand people have gathered to hear Jesus and to receive healing. And Jesus sees their hunger and feeds them with just five loaves and two fish. We are told that there was more than enough for everyone and then some--that twelve baskets of leftovers were collected after everyone had eaten their fill. More than enough and then some.

Then when Jesus travels on to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the crowds track him down. Jesus knows that the reason they have pursued him is because they are hoping to find an endless free buffet. The people are focused on the material goods they want. But Jesus also knows that material bread is not the only bread they need. He tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Humanity will give you." Jesus knows that there is another hunger as important as physical hunger, that these people are starving for.

Mother Theresa worked among the poorest of the poor in India. She regularly witnessed people starving from lack of food. But when she was asked which was the poorest country she had traveled to she answered, "Of all the countries I have been to, the poorest one . . . is America." She added, "America suffers most from the poverty of loneliness." Mother Theresa stated that "There are many in the world dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty--it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God."

This is the hunger Jesus understood, the other kind of hunger he tried to feed. And once again, to feed this hunger, Jesus offers bread. Only, this bread is himself. Jesus said, "I am the

bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." Think about that: *never* hungry. Once again, Jesus offers more than enough and then some.

The bread that Jesus offers our souls is quite simply and quite radically, love. Love is at the root of everything Jesus teaches, everything he preaches, every action he takes, every sacrifice he makes. We are not talking about a warm, sentimental love. What Jesus offers is God's love for us, a tenacious love that will never let us go no matter how horrible or wretched we might be. No matter what you have done, God loves you. No matter what you have failed to do, God loves you. No matter who you are, God loves you. God offers us love even when we do not return that love.

None of this means that God approves of all our behaviors or that God is indifferent to our misdeeds. But it means that God will never reject us, will never desert us, will never give up on us. God offers a love that not only forgives us but then has the power to change us, to transform us, to lead us into different ways of living and being.

It's not the threat of eternal damnation that will save us or change us. It is not the threat of God's wrath that will transform our hearts and minds. Rather, it is God's love that will save us and change us. We are like adolescents who are headed down a wrong path. You may have know some teenagers in your life or those classmates of your children, who were clearly in distress. Maybe they hurt themselves. Maybe they do drugs, sleep around, drink alcohol. You see these young people, having lived barely any time at all on this earth, and they are already headed for deep trouble. And you fear for them. Some kind of intervention is needed. You want to find a way to save them so they can know abundant life.

God wants to save us, you and me and every person on this planet, so that we can know abundant life. God sees our deep hunger and need. And so in love, God offers an intervention. Jesus.

Jesus comes to intervene and to address our hunger. And so he offers us bread. His love. Himself. From him we learn what it means to be loved and what it means to love. Eat this bread, Jesus tells us. Eat this bread and live.

We come to this Table so that we may eat this bread and live. It is not that this bread here is somehow magical. What makes it sacred is what it stands for. It stands for Jesus' love. It stands for Jesus' forgiveness and the power he offers us to be changed and start again. It stands for generosity, and compassion, and justice. Because all of these are the ingredients of love.

Eat this bread, Jesus tells us. It isn't enough to just follow Jesus. Jesus wants us to consume him--to take him into ourselves so that we may become healthy and whole and know the fullness of life. And then, when we take Jesus and his love into ourselves, something happens to us. *We* become the bread. You know that song we sometimes sing: "Let us be bread, blessed by the Lord, broken and shared, life for the world. Let us be wine, love freely poured, let us be one in the Lord."

We eat the bread so we may become the bread. Because everyone should have bread: bread for the body and bread for the soul. Everyone should be loved. Everyone should be accepted. Everyone should be safe. Everyone should be valued. Everyone should have enough and then some. We live in a world of hungry people--people who do not understand they are loved, people who do not feel accepted, people who are looking for love in all the wrong places, people who are acting in harmful ways because they have never learned about love, real love.

But here it is. Here it is. The bread Jesus gives us. Let us break this bread, and share this bread, and give this bread to all people, until everyone has enough, and then some.