

I AM: Building a Christ-Centered Church *Bread of Life*

John 6:24-35

January 14, 2024

American Christianity is at a crossroads. Undermined by the same forces that have eroded trust in nearly all institutions, we've experienced decades of decline and division. Scandals and controversies have wounded our witness. A craving for worldly power and political influence has driven many so-called Christian so-called leaders to embrace agendas increasingly divorced from gospel grounding, using faith as a weapon of abuse, a sign of supremacy, a fortress of isolation, or a license to judge. Some of the most amplified voices proclaim a Jesus I find nowhere in the pages of scripture—an idol built only to bless brazen ambition. As church affiliation has receded, religious and political identities have merged, with the latter often taking the lead. As the researcher Ryan Burge has written, "Politics has become our master identity. Everything else lines up behind partisanship." Let me be clear. This constitutes a kind of heresy. A church, or disciple, who believes we need a party, a president, or a nation to preserve the faith has replaced Jesus as Savior. Indeed, this is a dangerous theology. And so, the crossroads at which we Christians stand has everything to do with identity. It's time for some soul searching on the question: *who are we?*

And in the Christian community, responding to this question must follow deep reflection on an even more central question. *Who is Jesus?* Our identity must be built on Jesus Christ. As disciples, we make the bold claim that Jesus is Lord, and this confession must challenge every other loyalty and allegiance in our lives. *This* should be our master identity. Now, more than perhaps any time since the early Christian movement, we must have a clear, compelling answer to the question, "Who is Jesus for us? What differences does he make?"

And so, this Sunday we begin a sermon series on the statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, statements that bring clarity to our witness because they shine a light on who Jesus is. In John, Jesus tells us who he is. Seven times he begins foundational claims with the words *I AM*. This is not a neutral statement in the Gospel of John. It harkens back to the Book of Exodus and the burning bush from which Moses hears the words of God. *I AM who I AM*.

At this crossroads moment, in this time of rebuilding, we will let the words of Jesus Christ inspire and guide our way forward.

This morning's passage comes early in Jesus' ministry. Just before we tuned in, the hunger of a huge crowd has been miraculously alleviated with a meager supply of bread and fish. And so, as you would imagine, word gets around about this miraculous event and the man behind it. A growing group of intrigued observers approach Jesus, but their dialogue is laughably, almost painfully, disjointed because those in the crowd keep asking Jesus practical questions. And Jesus keeps responding with spiritual wisdom. They are interested in the bread that will keep them alive. *He* speaks of bread that makes life worth living. What they need most is what they already have in the presence of Jesus.

There is a deep hunger in our land. For some among us, that hunger is physical—unmet needs and desperate conditions. For others, the scarcity from which we suffer is more difficult to name. And yet, we feel it. Not the sharp sting of physical hunger pains but the persistent ache of anxious hearts and worried minds. Perhaps we sense that there must be more to life than what occupies our days. Some source

of more lasting nourishment. Some pathway to a more meaningful life. Some role for us to play. Some divine purpose for us to fill. Some call to serve the common good and relieve the suffering of others. The persistent ache of anxious hearts and worried minds leads to a feeling of helplessness. And in my pastoral experience, helplessness is often a close cousin to hopelessness. I'm hearing both in the voices of many within and beyond our community. There is a deep hunger in our land.

Jesus spoke to the crowds of hunger. Famine in the land of plenty. And so, we ask, as did they, "What do we lack? For what do we ache? What must we do?"

I think we are experiencing a famine of meaningful relationship. Last April, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, diagnosed us as a lonely nation. He proposed some steps to rebuild our social connections and communities, but the truth is that there is no quick fix to this particular hunger. Relationships are about time and about effort. They involve inevitable conflict and necessary reconciliation. They are the result of commitment over the long haul. Jesus spent much of his ministry gathering with others around meals. And yes, feeding hungry bellies was part of his purpose. But feeding the need for human community was at least as important, and the reason we know it to be true is because of who was invited to his table. Jesus gathered unlikely guests. He brought enemies to a common table. He invited the outcast, the left behind. He gave them a prized seat. Indeed, often it was his choice of dinner companions that got Jesus in the most trouble.

This weekend our nation remembers the life and renews the legacy of a powerful preacher whose faith-fueled witness spoke to our deepest hunger. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a movement shaped by the teachings of Jesus Christ. They were lessons he first learned as a child of the church, a son of the pastor. King rooted his work in the testimony of the earliest Christians, those first disciples who found the courage to imagine a different kind of world, a different kind of

kingdom, a deeper sense of nourishment. In one of his first sermons, after his installation as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist in Montgomery, King spoke these words, "We need to recapture the glow of the early Christians, who were nonconformists in the deepest sense of that word, refusing to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. Willingly they sacrificed fame, fortune, and life itself on behalf of the cause they knew to be right."

What would such nonconformity, such sacrifice, look like in our lives and in the life of our church? My sense is that it begins in relationships that break down dividing walls and overcome preconceived judgements. In a time of painful isolation and destructive disintegration, the church sets a table. The church sends an invitation. What if, in the months ahead, we were intentional about that practice? What if each of us made the conscious choice to widen our circle, to stretch beyond our comfort zone? What if here we intensified our efforts to become a more inclusive community, and what if we carefully listened to the voices of those whose experience is not our own? I believe that we would find a deeper sense of unity, more commonality than we might imagine, and a surprising surge of the hope we are desperate to feel.

Those crowds following Jesus begged him for a sign, a sign that would prove his worthiness, a sign that would show that he, like Moses, could command God to rain down bread from Heaven. Perhaps another miracle, a healing, a feeding, a magic trick. But the only sign Jesus offered was himself. The greatest miracle was his own life offered as bread for a famished world. Blessed, broken, and shared. He is the bread of life. He is the nourishment that satisfies our deepest hunger. And so, whenever we build our faith on self-sufficiency or succumb to the idolatry of human leaders, what we will find are only empty spiritual calories. When we begin our work in the presence of Jesus, we will find sustenance for a courageous and costly witness. Friends, we must never give in to hopelessness because we are never helpless. Having been fed, we must offer ourselves in acts of service and compassion.

The week before Christmas, a handwritten note appeared on my desk. It was addressed "to all that manage and help at the food pantry" and signed "a thankful patron." The writer describes how she used to volunteer at the food pantry near her home and how, as a volunteer, she was always surprised to see folks who had fulltime jobs coming to receive food. After all, she and her husband both worked. They were able to save money. They bought a house. Raised two sons. And then, an accident at work. Her husband had open heart surgery. Spent a month in the hospital. Savings depleted. A series of crises. A need she never could have imagined. She closes her letter this way: "Your pantry makes a huge difference in our lives, a difference we never thought we would need. As it is, we could not afford the items we receive there. So thank you for making life a little easier. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas."

Friends, as followers of the one who is the Bread of Life, we must be about the work of feeding those who are hungry. We do that in many different ways. The work of this congregation has a sustaining and transformative impact on our city and for our neighbors in need. But there is so much more to do.

There is a hunger in our land, and we have bread to share. There is despair among us, and we have hope to offer. There are children of God who suffer exclusion, who are wounded by hateful words, and we have a table set by the one who says, "Come to me, all who are weary."

Yes, there is work for us to do. He told us who he was. The bread of life. Given for you. Meant to be shared. Amen.