

"Bread Talk"

I only know of one person who does not like bread. Everyone else I know likes at least some kind of bread. Some people do not care for pumpnickel; some do not choose rye; still some only eat white bread. I don't know if the appeal is the price or the preservatives.

Bread. Some of my fondest childhood memories are associated with visits to my grandmother's house. And we always had fresh, homemade biscuits for supper, because she made biscuits everyday. The leftover biscuits were used at breakfast the next morning. I never remember my grandmother popping open a tube of biscuits made by the Pillsbury Dough Boy. She made her own bread; her bread tray, the tool in which she mixed the ingredients and kneaded the dough looked something like half of a hollow log. But those biscuits smelled so good while cooking.

Bread. Nothing says "home" more appealing than the earthy scent of bread fresh from the oven. Mennonites tell us that the surest way to sell a house is to have bread baking in the kitchen when prospective buyers arrive. The aroma of bread triggers a mood of shelter and sanctuary. Real estate agents also concur with this idea.

The Bible has much to say about bread. Jesus called himself the "Bread of Life." When we observe communion, we begin with the serving of the bread. But bread is also mentioned in the Old Testament.

We find a familiar quote in our Old Testament Lesson regarding bread. "Man shall not live by bread alone." Because of its popularity, the phrase is often overused and has forfeited some of its meaning. I have heard someone say, "Man shall not live by bread alone, a little peanut butter and jelly are needed too." The implication is that simplicity is not desired and that more is better. But as I read from our Old Testament Lesson, there is more to the phrase. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of God." So now we are told that we need more than bread; we need to depend on God.

Jesus quoted this verse during one of the temptations at the outset of his ministry. Being in the desert for forty days and nights, Jesus was encouraged to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger. Jesus answered the temptation with this verse, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." In repelling an attempt to focus on physical needs, Jesus, despite his hunger pangs, riveted on his *spiritual* needs. Our passage encourages us to do likewise.

Moses was addressing the Children of Israel after they had been delivered from Egyptian slavery and led by God through the wilderness. The Ten Commandments had been handed down to the people to provide boundaries of instruction in following this great God who promised their ancestor Abraham that their nation would be great. God was instructing them that if they were to be a great nation, then they had some *responsibility* too. They were not chosen simply as a *privilege*; they had to fulfill their end of the bargain as well. So Moses reminded the Children of Israel that they should remember the way that God had led them through their darkest hour. Our *memory* can be used as a teacher. Moses told the people to remember how God was with them in their hour of dire need, how that God provided their needs, even when they could not understand.

Wandering around in the wilderness for forty years would have been quite an adventure: moving from place to place; fleeing the wrath of Pharaoh; listening to Moses continuing to plead for a total dependence on God. Again, Moses reminded them that it was God who provided manna, a bread-like substance, to erase their hunger.

Because they were hungry, God provided them with something to eat. When they saw it, the Israelites did not know what this bread-like substance was. So they said, "What is it?" or in their native tongue, they said, "Manna?" which means "what is it." (Exodus 16:14) Moses reminded them in

verse three that the manna was something unfamiliar to them and their ancestors. Yet this bread sustained them throughout the wilderness wanderings. Bread addresses human hunger with greater pertinence than *any* food. And for many hungry people today, even a stale ration of this staple, crust by crust, can wage a valiant campaign against starvation. Manna erased their hunger.

But Moses also told them that during their forty-year jaunt, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet swell. Do you think those clothes were made with such fine fabric that it would last forty years? I wonder if anybody present today can wear some clothes that you wore forty years ago. That would have been 1969; perhaps those clothes from the late 60s have become fashionable once again. And regarding the feet not swelling for forty years during their travels: my guess is that not even Rockport can make that kind of claim. These were not *magic* clothes, shoes, nor even bread.

The focus of the passage and of the wandering in the wilderness should not be placed on the *physical* needs that were met. It is amazing to me that shoes or clothes did not wear out for forty years, and that folks did not starve to death out in the desert. The focal point instead should be on the *Provider*.

For the Israelites in the wilderness, the absence of food was the preeminent concern. They would certainly *die* without nourishment. If their feet became swollen or their clothes became tattered, they could have *still* survived. But without food, they would have perished. Without divine intervention, they would have been prey for the buzzards and vultures. People in such a predicament care not for the extras of peanut butter and jelly, for the frills. Even today, bread is more important than wealth, power, or prestige. If someone falls into an open mine shaft and has a check book available to access millions of dollars, but doesn't have bread, eventually, without some aid, the person will die. The person would trade all possessions just to taste some bread, or drink some water.

So what lesson was God teaching? That we should depend upon God for our daily sustenance? While that is certainly a valid application, it falls somewhat short of the full *impact* of the message. Verse three of our passage states that "God fed the people with a bread they did not know." Although this *includes* the dependence upon God as the Provider, the meaning should travel much deeper. *Physical* bread is not the issue at all; it is merely the *illustration*. The lesson speaks of the essential core of life, indeed of the source of life. God fed the Israelites with a *mystery*. Manna was the surface manifestation of the substance beyond. We are finite, and this passage again reminds us of the character of God. There is a mystery about God and the love of God that we cannot comprehend, and thus we are left with the only option of embracing it.

Manna tasted like wafers with honey. How gracious of God to reveal this truth in such an appetizing manner. The lesson of manna indicates that the true delight is not in the *taste* of honey, but in the *Giver* of honey. We are to understand that completion is not to be found in the *creation* but in the *Creator*.

Manna fell directly from the hand of a gracious provider. It was designed to feed the physical body and to point to a higher reality. This it did. Manna was provided in the absence of anything else. There were not options. There were no additions to the menu.

The Israelites were accustomed, as we are, to deriving their food from crops and animals raised in accordance with the normal functions of the physical world. Their nourishment was the result of tilling, planting, cultivating, harvesting. They ate because they toiled, and God was more or less involved because of the weather conditions, and the facts that God created the earth and provided strength to the workers of the soil.

But the Exodus from Egypt changed that for the Israelites. They could no longer till the ground or sow seeds. The mercy of God was clearly the *only* escape from starvation.

The mere *provision* of bread was not the entire lesson. After all, the Israelites witnessed greater miracles in their elusive escape from Pharaoh. But its source was God and God alone, without any

human component. The substance of the bread was of food, but the message was of God. God had spoken, although quietly, and the message was this, "God alone is the giver of all that humanity needs, all that humanity is."

Without the presence of God, we are incomplete, empty, and lacking. There is not only the body to feed, there is the spirit, which cannot be fed by the material. God proved to the Israelites over the forty-year period that God alone is the one who sustains the body. Our spiritual lives, as well as our physical lives, are just that: manifestations of God's life. Within God alone is to be found the highest nourishment, the true substance, the true bread.

C.S. Lewis said it like this, "God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. God alone is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other."

This is our hope: to feed on God. In God exclusively is life. God is the unlimited, unchanging personality that can satisfy the longings and needs of humankind. And to feast on God is impossible without the Word of God.

The Word of God goes beyond the stone tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the leafy pages of the Bible. These manifestations offer the *scent* of food, like freshly baked bread, and lead us to it, but are not in themselves the nourishment of the soul. The infinite God surpasses all human language.

Gregory Post writes the following concerning our discussion of bread: "We stand at a fork in the road.

"In one direction we see a wide path--we might even call it a boulevard--with many inviting stations and markets along the route. Displays of merchandise beckon the eye. To look is to want. But to have is to hunger, for the wares offer but a hollow crust of reality. The things are real, but they are not real enough. They are not what life is about . . .

"In the other direction we see a different kind of path. Yes, a narrow path. It is traveled, but not heavily. The footprints are few enough to be readable. The way is overgrown; the terrain is difficult. Blind corners await. There is only one sign. It reads: "True Bread." The footprints tell us that many started down this path and then turned around and took the other one. They probably wore their play clothes, expecting to obtain the true bread handily, expecting to be on the path but a short while anyway, and we can picture them turning back, tired and empty-handed. The smells of the carnival have pulled them. Those messages of frying fat and spinning sugar have drifted over from the other path and masked the finer scent. But if one stand there and open's one's nostrils-if one concentrates-one can distinguish the smell of fresh, warm, lovely bread.

"We understand however that the path itself is no picnic. Some of the persevering footsteps are deep and tilted, as if here and there a soldier had dug a secure stance to help him ward off an enemy. Clearly the path to peace and feasting travels the way of warriors. It is a battleground, not a playground. And the promise of great reward--is it only a rumor?

"Many a pilgrim has passed up God's bakery to feed on sugarcoated vanity. We stand at a fork in the road where a crucial decision must be made. In a sense we stand here at the beginning of every day. Down which road will you travel? And what will you eat along the way?"

Today, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, when we have so much for which to be grateful, I hope that you choose the narrow path, and take of the bread of life, the One who has already provided everything that we need and promises to continue to do so.

Jesus said, "Take and eat; this is my body which is broken for you. Each time you eat this bread, remember me."