

LIVING BREAD

John 6:35, 41-51

By Jessica C. Gregory

August 9, 2015

Last fall I received a square piece of mail from the Board of Pensions, the Presbyterian Church USA Medical Benefits and Pension organization. Usually mail from the Board is standard envelope size and contains my Explanation of Benefits summary from a recent doctor visit. Not surprisingly I have been known to let these envelopes stack up unopened. But this square piece of mail was clearly different... so I opened it. I pulled out an Invitation to Presbyterian CREDO. I immediately yelled who hoo!—a very unusual response to a B of P mailing. But this mailing—this invitation—was, for a Presbyterian Pastor, like winning the lottery. You see, CREDO is an eight day retreat highly subsidized by the Board. Think of an all-expense paid trip. During these eight days I would hear from expert faculty about how to live a balanced life—to be vocationally, physically, financially and spiritually well. I would worship every day...and not lead even one prayer. I would have the gift of time to reflect, read and pray.

And, I would have eight nights of sleep uninterrupted by children waking up...eight days of eating meals prepared for me and never having to do the dishes... and eight mornings when I didn't have to rush. I quickly signed up for the June conference and looked forward to it with anticipation. To be clear, this was not a vacation, and there were many surveys and questionnaires that I filled out beforehand. I did this work diligently as I wondered exactly what the week would bring. On Monday June 15th, after spending many hours at O'Hare waiting for an hour-long flight to Louisville, I arrived at the Wooded Glen Retreat Center in Henryville, Indiana. This quiet town is just over the Ohio River from Louisville. As I was driven down the winding road nestled in woods toward the retreat center I felt my body begin to relax. I said a prayer of thanksgiving. I didn't know what was going to happen during my time here but I knew it would be good.

During the first days of CREDO I kept thinking how blessed I was to have this opportunity, and I almost felt a little guilty about it. None of my friends in other professions had such opportunities—why should I? I continued to offer thanks to God and participated fully in the workshops. As the days continued, there were fewer workshops and more time for reflection. I began to recognize the hard work that I was doing. I began to recognize that the time given to us for prayer, reading and reflection was used by God to stir up within me all sorts of questions, realizations and yearnings for my spiritual life. Stirring that I hadn't experienced in a very long time. Stirring that was exhausting, emotionally and physically. Stirring that was essential for my spiritual growth. This is why I had come. This is why the Board of Pensions had invited me. My pastoral call could best be strengthened with time and space— time and space given to me by CREDO.

In this time and space I realized my neglect in prioritizing my spiritual well-being. This was not intentional; it happened gradually as my ministry responsibilities increased and my time to do

them did not. But, if I am honest, I know that it happened in part because nurturing and growing my relationship with God seemed less important than serving her. It also happened because such relationship work is challenging and not always satisfying.

In contrast, seeing the fruits of one's service is gratifying. As you fellow doers know, tremendous meaning is found in serving others. And, when done within a church group, this serving makes us feel more connected to God. Such living is encouraged and modeled in three of our gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each offers numerous stories of Jesus' doing through his teaching and miracles and shows us how we can be like the Jesus of humanity. Our belief in Jesus is fortified by knowing what he did.

By being his hands and feet in the world our faith is strengthened. But is this the same as it being challenged and nurtured or does our Spiritual well-being depend on more? Our Spiritual well-being finds much nurture in the Fourth gospel, the Gospel of John. Rather than focusing on the human Jesus, John focuses more on the divine Christ— who he IS is at the forefront rather all that he DID. As one commentator describes, John has the "ability to lift its readers out of the historical moments of Jesus' life to the lofty heights of the cosmos" (152 Reinhartz). The gospel of John acts as a bridge from the historical realities of Jesus' time to the philosophical and theological realm of Christ's reign. Our passage for this morning is a brilliant illustration of this:

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes through me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst....I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

We thought it was difficult to grasp the miracle of feeding 5000 and then we come to this. What does it mean? We are not the only ones who struggle with it. So too did those Jesus was talking to. The people listening to Jesus--Jews from a synagogue in Capernaum--were religious insiders who knew rabbinic tradition. They knew the proper teaching about God's heaven well enough to know that it was being violated by what Jesus was saying, and that simply did not make sense. After hearing Jesus' proclamation they complained: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he say 'I have come down from heaven?'"

How does Jesus expect them to believe he came from heaven when these men know his parents? Jesus' claim was offensive to them. But I also think it made them nervous--nervous that somehow what Jesus was saying was the truth, which would unhinge their core teachings about God and rock their faith. Going even deeper, perhaps these men feared how their lives would change if they did believe that Jesus was the Bread of Life.

Just a few days before, crowds were requesting bread from Jesus and here he is stating that he IS the bread that they seek. Part of the community was aware that bread and life were symbols common in religion, but Jesus identifies himself using that imagery. Jesus speaks the religious language of the people in hopes that they can leap with him to the spiritual realm in which he lives. But rather than leaping forward, the men look back at how God provided for their ancestors as they fled Egypt and journeyed through the wilderness. Gratitude to God for their

liberation from slavery was quickly replaced by hunger, and the Israelites complained to God about their empty stomachs—just like the men are complaining to Jesus now.

In response to that grumbling God gave them manna from heaven and water from a rock. God did these acts so that the people might live. These signs were offered to nourish the Israelites' bodies but also their souls. But the Israelites' bodily nourishment was fleeting and their souls did not open to God. It was this lack of trust and faith that led to the Israelites' death, as is explained in the book of Numbers: "...none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs I did in Egypt and in the wilderness... [and yet]... have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors" (Numbers 14:22-23a). Jesus reminds the men of this outcome: "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." He then compares himself to this manna, saying "This is the bread that comes down from heaven. I am the living bread that comes down from heaven" (John 6:49-51).

Nowhere else in John is Jesus' heavenly descent described so often. The evangelist is being intentional to connect the Israelites' manna miracle with Jesus' self-revelation as the bread of life. He is attempting to bridge the concrete experience of what God has done with the spiritual abstract reality of who God IS in Jesus Christ and make clear that it is Jesus—he is the one people need to for life; it is belief in him that enables one to truly live. Jesus says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Bread and water will keep your body alive, yes, but belief in Jesus enables you to have life abundant on this earth and eternally: This is the bread that comes down from heaven that one may eat of it and not die. Just as Jesus is both human and divine, one must believe both the concrete miracles of feeding seen and experienced by the people and the spiritual, abstract, divine Spirit of God.

To do so is to experience life abundant: life that does not die but lives forever—Human and Divine; Flesh and Spirit...

Science and Religion. A pair that is often put in opposition but must and can be put together to create a beautiful dance of life abundant. Author, speaker, retreat leader and Pastor Rob Bell describes this dance in a remarkable way on his "Everything is Spiritual" tour. Last Sunday, Ryan and I heard this talk. Neither of us had heard him before and did not know what to expect. We arrived to find a stage with just one prop—a triangular white marker board—a white marker board that would become covered with facts about the scientific evolutionary process and God's Spirit within it. It is impossible to share the many ideas Rob presented that night. He spoke very quickly and said a lot! If you are interested you can find clips on youtube, but here are some of the main points:

The universe started as a single particle and 13.9 billion years later we are here. The amount of progress and complexity that our universe has experienced in that time is astounding. There has been a constant move forward; the particle became atoms, which became molecules and on and on and on. There has been a consistent increase in our universe's complexity, depth and unity—even as it continues to use the same original building pieces composed in myriad ways. As Rob said, "We are made up of the same stuff as everything else." And yet humans are

uniquely complex in our ability to think and feel and wonder. There is so much more to us than our bodies. In addition to our physical composition we have Spirit. To use Rob's image, "we are an exotic cocktail of dust and spirit."

Our passage for this morning calls us to pay attention to our Spirit; to reflect on who it is in whom we believe. As we live each day we live as Spiritual beings, whether we recognize it or not.

We spend our days caring for our immediate needs of food and drink but find we are still hungry. That hunger comes from the yearning for God. A yearning to partake in the bread of life that is Jesus, who miraculously and mysteriously is able to keep our souls full even in our darkest times of despair, when no food or drink can satisfy the cavern of emptiness within us; who miraculously and mysteriously enables us to experience joy beyond our understanding in those times of bright light; who is calling us now and always to eat from him and be nourished now and forever.

I ate well at CREDO. The homemade meals that included decadent desserts like Kentucky pie and warm apple cobbler insured that my stomach was always filled. But it was in a meeting room turned sanctuary, huddled around a long table, passing a round loaf of fresh bread that I was nourished.

As I tore off a generous piece of this simple food, dipped it in the grape juice and ate it I was filled. Through a mystery and miracle, God's Spirit washed over me, and I knew that I was enough...I was loved...I was God's, now and forever. We are all enough...loved...and God's, now and forever. The Living Bread enables us to live life abundantly. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Work Cited

Reinhartz, Adele. 2011. "The Gospel According to John" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* Marc Zvi Brettler and Amy-Jill Levine, eds. New York: Oxford University Press. 152-196.