

Who is your bread?

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Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” This is just one of seven “I am” metaphors that Jesus uses throughout the gospel of John which express his saving relationship toward the world.

I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine.

Seems simple enough, straightforward enough. Or at least at first consideration it does. But when I think about metaphors that I might use to describe *myself*, the exercise becomes quickly daunting. It seems much easier to use basic nouns to describe who I am: I am a daughter, a sister, a singer, a camp enthusiast, a child of God. Nouns are easy. Metaphors can be difficult to ascribe to oneself. I could say “I am a warm mug of coffee”, but there have certainly been times when that’s not so true; when my warmth has been replaced with coolness and I’m more like that mug of coffee that you tried to heat up in the microwave and then forgot about until the next morning—the grounds thick and heavy in the bottom of the mug, something you aren’t keen to swallow.

Perhaps I could say “I am a budding flower.” I am still learning. I am just beginning to bloom into a new role as a minister. But then, there are other parts of me that are far more developed; parts that are already in full bloom and growing ever taller and stronger. Am I cutting myself short by only being a bud? Will others think less of me and my previous experiences if I identify as something so new and fragile?

John's gospel gives us, as listeners, the opportunity to question Jesus and his "I am" statements in the same way. Certainly we could take those metaphors at face value and label Jesus as good, as a model to us all; a teacher, a prophet, a preacher. Or, we can use those "I am" statements to ask ourselves, "Is Jesus who he says he is?" or "Is Jesus the bread of *my* life?"

In our scripture today, Jesus is confronted by a crowd of people. They have been following him around and have witnessed the miracle of his feeding 5000 people with just a few loaves and a couple fish. And the following day, when the crowd requests another bread miracle, Jesus tells them to look beyond the miracle of this feeding to the sign that it points to. He tells them to work, "not for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." The crowd wants to perform the works of God, but they don't know how. So Jesus explains: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent." But this isn't enough for the crowd. They have missed the point of the sign they already witnessed in the multiplication of bread and ask for another sign so that they might see and believe that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of Man. The crowd explains that when their ancestors needed a sign in the wilderness, manna was sent from heaven to eat. Jesus responds not with another miracle, but with confirmation that the manna was sent from God, his Father, and gives life to the world. And then a bold statement: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

This statement makes some people in the crowd uncertain, to say the least. This man—this Jesus—actually claims to be the Son of Man? To be the bread of life sent

from heaven to earth? Like the manna sent from God all those years ago? Sent to nourish hungry souls? Sent to reveal God, the Father, the Creator, the Almighty, to all?
Is Jesus really who he says he is?

For many in the crowd, this seems impossible. They know who Jesus' parents are—Mary and Joseph. And, as far as they are concerned, Mary and Joseph are *not* divine, they are entirely human. So how could Jesus have come down from heaven to be the bread of life if his parents have a known address, right here on earth? And so, they complain about Jesus. We see this theme of complaining when we go back to the story of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness; here too, the people complained about Moses and Aaron and the fact that their freedom has only led them to hunger and what seems like certain death due to starvation. But the Israelites are told to “draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.” And God provided bread: manna rained down from heaven. And this was a sign for the people that God was among them. Now there is complaining once more, about Jesus who claims to be divine. About Jesus, who the crowd demands a sign from in order to prove that God is among them in the form of this man. But Jesus, like Moses, hears their complaining and, like Moses, speaks of drawing near to God; he says, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.”

So, Jesus says “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” And the crowd responds with complaining and the implicit question “are you really who you say you are?” And Jesus never really directly answers that question. Instead he states that people should come

to him by way of God—God who they have heard and learned from; God who, Jesus also explains, no one has actually seen, except the One who comes from God.

There is a lot going on here. Jesus is bread; the satisfaction for the heart's hunger and thirst. But, is Jesus who he says he is? Jesus is both divine—coming from heaven—and human—having human parents. But, is Jesus really who he says he is? People come to God through Jesus, the one who reveals God to us because only he has seen the Creator. Can this really be true? Could Jesus be the bread of life? The bread of *my* life?

What Jesus does reveal to us in this dialogue with the crowd is a promise: you will *never* be hungry again. You will *never* be thirsty again. And for those of us who understand or can imagine what it is like to be without faith, without hope, without love, this promise says a great deal. This promise asks us to draw close to Jesus, even if we're unsure, and feed until that emptiness inside is filled to overflowing. Jesus promises that we won't need to find other entertainments to fill the emptiness; we won't need the latest and greatest gadgets to substitute for our yearnings; we won't need to give into the fact that, as William Willimon puts it, "our culture is a vast supermarket of desire." We need desire only one thing: the Son of Man from whom we may eat and not die but live forever. This promise has the power to fill our emptiness, and we need only believe. And this is the main question that confronts us and that confronted the crowds all those years ago: Will you believe?

If we continued to read on in today's scripture, we would see the stark difference between the crowd and the disciples. The crowd has various attitudes towards Jesus, but is open to hearing him. The disciples accept what Jesus says and are trying to

follow him. They have made the choice to draw near to God: they believe. So, the question is put to all of us: will you believe? Will you be the open but uncertain crowd? Or will you be the accepting and committed disciples who are ready to try and follow? Jesus uses metaphors to try and help us understand what that commitment really means. Because when all this begins to get a bit fuzzy, and our thoughts get hazy in the high up spiritual concepts, Jesus brings us back down to earth with his incarnational, God-in-the-flesh statement that connects us to the tangible and everyday: I am your bread, feed on me.

I noticed that trying to come up with metaphors that apply to the way others in this world view me is difficult. None of us presents ourselves in the exact same way at all times; we shift based on where we are, who we're around, what we're doing, if we're in a professional situation or a casual one, if we're excited about a task or dreading it, if we're tired or awake, if we're hungry or full. This makes devising metaphors tricky if the focus is on trying to come up with one that applies to who you are in every shifting moment of your life. But if we switch the exercise from metaphors that apply to how others view you to metaphors of how *God* views you, the task, I think, becomes easier. Now it's easier to say things like, "I am a precious gift," "I am a pillar," "I am light." Mother Theresa gives an excellent example: "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world." God doesn't love with human understandings and conditions and judgements. God loves unconditionally and with a greater depth of understanding than we can ever know or experience. What we *can* notice is that metaphors reveal. They tell us in image-evoking words something deeper and richer. They present an idea that branches off into a number of different

descriptions and stories and explanations and concepts. And the metaphors that Jesus uses are ways of revealing who God is to us. Through Christ, we know that God wants us to be fed spiritually. Through Christ, we know that God wants us to be light—to not be stuck in darkness, hopelessness, and strapped to sin. Through Christ, we know that God wants us to come through the gateway and be with God forever. Through Christ, we know that God offers resurrection and life—even in this world we are not trapped in physical, mental, emotional or spiritual death; there are always opportunities for new life. And these revelations can help us to not just read the words on the page, but to grapple with who God is, who Jesus is, who our bread is. These revelations challenge us to consider if we are a part of that crowd, or if we are disciples. These revelations encourage us to keep asking questions. Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to alleviate our emptiness. Can it be that many of our desires are, in the eternal scheme of things, pointless? Might it be true that Christ is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek? Is it true that God has come to us, miraculously with us, before us, like manna that is miraculously dropped into our wilderness? Keep looking around. Keep listening carefully. Keep asking questions. The answers may be in your next taste of bread.