

Riverside United Church
18 August, 2024

Offered by - Karen Percy

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 111

1Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
2Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.
3Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.
4He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.
5He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.
6He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.
7The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.
8They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
9He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.
10The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

John 6:51-58

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."
52The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"
53So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;
55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.
56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.
57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.
58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Payer

Holy Nurturer.
Give us hearts that hunger for Your word.
Ears that are quick to hear.
And hearts of understanding that we may grow in grace.
Nourish us this day, oh Holy One,
through Your Son - The Bread of heaven. Amen

Reflection: What Will Become of Your Bread?

Earlier this morning, in John's Gospel, we heard Jesus offer the following words, "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." We then hear that the Temple authorities, who were in attendance, question each other about this statement. They rebuked it by asking, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Though the author of the Gospel only alludes to the Temple authorities questioning the meaning of these words, I suspect there were others who questioned these words spoken by Jesus. If we were present then, I suspect that we too would question these same words. We too would raise our own questions.

To render the message clearer to the listeners, Jesus often used parables when teaching. Throughout Scripture we learn time and time again that the disciples along with others have questioned the words that Jesus offered when teaching. The result was as varied, just as it is today, for us as the readers. As someone who also enjoys parables, I can attest that on occasions there have been times when the parable I used, which seemed blatantly obvious to me, confused the living daylight out of my listener at that time.

Given Jesus' love of parables, it is no wonder that Jesus' words at that moment caused confusion. After all, hearing words such as: "I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you..." Any one of us would question the exact nature of the meaning of these words. Though these words were not presented as a parable in its entirety, were they to be taken at face value or was it another example of how Jesus offered his teachings in ways that were both obvious and hidden?

John's writing is one that transcends literalism as he seeks to share Jesus' life as one who transcends limits, breaks barriers, and invites us all into a new place that he represents. This Gospel is about the divine appearing in the human form and calling us to a new understanding of what divinity means.¹

Earlier, we heard Jesus' words, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." Living bread. In reflecting on this passage for this morning, these two little words, "Living bread" strike me as curious words to use. "Living bread" - "living word." Living - is what they both have in common. That means that this thing Jesus is speaking of exists already within us. Or at least in the moment of "consuming" it, it lives within. It is living.

Though I have heard this Scripture passage before, there is something about it that makes me want to sit with a question that I have never pondered before, until now. If we as living people, have faith - then we are considered to have the living bread within us. So, if I, as a living person, have a living bread within me, which bread do I see myself as? What about you? In the vastness of the types of bread found throughout the world, which bread resonates for you, for your personality or for your faith journey? For many of us, it would depend on the day as to the response that we would offer.

Do we see ourselves as like a dry, crusty crouton that has little zest for life? Or do you uplift the spirits of others as quickly as a popular molasses bread with raisins from back home? Just being in its presence, its delightful aroma alone offers enough nourishment for those blessed to be in its proximity! Would pita bread seem more like you? Ready to live with a heart wide open, ready to be filled with the goodness of life? Did you ever think that you were foregoing all this deep pondering of life's meaning in the bakery department! I, for one, have not looked at the bread section in a supermarket in the same way since reflecting on this sermon. Living bread.

The other day, while waiting in a restaurant, I noticed a coin on the floor between myself and another lady. I picked up this shiny coin and asked her if it was hers. She said it was not. Her daughter alongside her was no more than six or seven years old. I said to her little girl that this shiny coin was meant then for her. She beamed a big smile and said thank you.

What she did next though surprised me. She looked at the shiny coin, let it roll in her little palm for a few seconds, and then walked over to the donation box. There she added her coin to the collection for raising funds to send children to a camp. I heard her coin drop and join the other coins.

Then it clicked! This is what it means to have living bread within us. This little loaf added her sweetness to the world by thinking of others, by being who she was intended to be. This little girl could have easily pocketed that coin and this story would never have crossed my mind again.

¹John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of A Jewish Mystic* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 68.

Watching this little girl, take this coin and give it away without a moment's hesitation, to give it away so that its goodness might help someone else. This is what it means to have the living bread within us! To be guided to do good even when we think no one is watching.

I was so humbled by this small but generous effort of this little loaf of goodness. I took a few minutes with her to say how I admired how she was led by her heart and that more people should be like her. I recognize that this moment might not make the top news story of the day - yet it is indeed a Good News Story! Perhaps this is what Jesus was trying to say when he spoke of the living word. It is when we allow ourselves to be moved by God's love to be used as agents of change.

We saw this earlier in the year when our own community of faith here at Riverside United partnered with community groups and played a significant role in bringing the Brookfield Community Food Cupboard to fruition. A food initiative to be proud of; one that assists many in our community who are experiencing food insecurity. This is just one example of being the living bread.

Where else can we, as individuals, be emboldened to offer this living bread and add nourishment to others? Are we able to see the one struggling with an addiction as another child of God or do we remain tethered to the misconception that they brought this on themselves? Are we able to offer compassion and respect to a neighbour, a coworker, friend, or family member when they make poor decisions? Do we remain open to foster deeper conversations with someone or a group when their opinion vastly differs from ours? Are we ready to stand up and offer the living bread of justice when we are moved to call someone out for inappropriate behaviour, even if this behaviour happens at our own table?

Could we allow ourselves, for example, to be emboldened to rethink how we use some of our church buildings that sit empty throughout the week, can we see them being offered as cooling / warming centres in the face of the increasing weather crises that many places are experiencing? There is no one way to be the living bread. Being the living bread is simply being open hearted to see Jesus as the doorway, if you will, to God, to be nourished completely while embracing being embodied by the Holy Mystery.

What will become of our bread? Will we keep it to ourselves, or will we be quick to offer its gift of nourishment to others? As we prepare to leave this place, let us be reminded of the comfort of the Living Bread in our own lives. Let us be emboldened by its warming presence and its sustaining grace. Go out in this world ready to share this Living Bread in the same manner that the Holy Nurturer offers it to us. Living bread! Living Word! Living in us! Thanks be to God. Amen.