

Life-giving and loving God, Help us to always hunger after you for righteousness' sake. For the gift of yourself as the Bread of Heaven, we give you thanks. Amen.

We encounter Jesus teaching about spiritual hunger in the lesson that we have today from the Gospel of John. Just prior to today's reading, the 6th Chapter of John tells the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus has just satisfied the physical hunger of the crowds that were following him. And now he begins an extended teaching on the real message that he wants to get across. It was a message that the disciples and the crowds that followed Jesus needed to hear.

And it's a message that we still need to hear today. In giving this message, Jesus used a metaphor that was unique to the history, traditions, and customs of his own day, yet common and universal enough to contain meaning for anyone who hears the story. The image of bread.

Manna in the wilderness was an immediate image for the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived. Having been rescued from the hands of their oppressors in Egypt, the ancient Hebrew people found themselves in the wilderness, at the point of starvation and dehydration. Hearing their cry for relief, God provided water from a rock, and manna from heaven each evening. Water and bread from heaven. A miracle of deliverance for the Hebrew people. A memory so powerful that it became a part of the Passover, the defining liturgy of the Jewish people.

Making reference to the manna from the wilderness experience was just not something that you made light of. And here is Jesus, claiming that he himself is the bread that came down from heaven. This is another one of those *who does he think he is?* moments in the Gospels. Some in the crowd listening to Jesus knew Mary his mother, and Joseph his father. How can Jesus talk about coming down from heaven?

And then Jesus really drives the point home. In this reading, John begins to develop one of the primary theological teachings of his Gospel. Jesus proclaims *I am the bread of life*. John writes - *Ego eimi- I am*.

Six more times in this Gospel, John will record Jesus as proclaiming *Ego Eimi – I am*. I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, truth, life; I am the true vine.

John was writing his Gospel to a Greek speaking audience. An audience made of up both Gentiles and Jews. For the Jewish followers of Jesus reading this Gospel these *I am* statements of Jesus would be near blasphemy. Blasphemy because these are the same words spoken by God on Mt. Sinai at the burning bush, when Moses asked 'who shall I say sent me?' In other words – *What is your name?* God replied – *Ego Eimi – I am*.

As we would anglicize the Hebrew, God's response to the question: *What is your name?* become Jehovah, or Yahweh. But to those who read and spoke Greek, on Mt. Sinai, God said that his name was *Ego Eimi – I am*. And now Jesus says the same thing about himself. *I am the bread of life*.

Jesus told his audience: We know that our ancestors ate manna in the desert. They drank water from a rock. Those were miracles – they were gifts from God. Those were wonderful things. But Jesus pushed them: Our ancestors ate and drank that marvelous food and drink. But they died. Miracle food that it was, it was not the food of eternal life. Whoever comes *to me* will never be hungry, Jesus told them, and whoever *believes in me* will never be thirsty. You think manna was a miracle? Jesus said. *Ego Eimi - I am the bread of life*.

The disciples and the crowds who followed Jesus experienced the same hunger and the same thirst that our world experiences today. The hunger and thirst represented by lives separated from God.

D. T. Niles, leader of the Church of South India a half century ago, defined evangelism as one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread. That's our job, in this place and at this time. We know what it is to be hungry and thirsty in our souls. And as Christians, we believe that we have encountered the one who can say *Ego Eimi* –I am the bread of life.

It doesn't really matter whether we distribute stale crackers, wafers baked by nuns, homemade sourdough bread, a piece of pita, or even a pancake from breakfast this morning. It's not that kind of bread we're talking about. What does matter is that we were hungry once, and another hungry person told us that it is gathered around a table like this that we can find the bread of heaven.

During the next few weeks, talk about this bread to someone that you know. Someone that you know, that you really know, is hungry. Tell them that you've been hungry, too. Tell them that this is a place full of hungry people. Don't tell them that it is a perfect place. It's not. Don't tell them that the building is beautiful, or that we have fantastic music, or that our Sunday School program is the best ever. We do have an incredible campus, and our music is over the top, and our Sunday School programs are providing our children with a wonderful foundation for their lives as children of God. But don't tell your friends about any of that. Tell them that this is a place where hungry people, come every week to be together, to pray together, to confess our sins together, and to experience an encounter with the One – the *Ego Eimi* – who is the bread of life.