

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

Way back in the second book of the Bible, you may remember Moses, who is out minding his father-in-law's business by keeping watch of his sheep. He suddenly stops to notice a bush that is burning and yet is not consumed by the flames. And then he hears a Voice that sends him back to Egypt, a Voice that calls him to be the reluctant leader of his people, a Voice that says "tell old Pharaoh to let my people go."

Initially, Moses resists. Pharaoh will probably think I am delusional, he tells the Voice. (Heck, I wonder if I *am* delusional?) *So if Pharaoh asks who has sent me, whom shall I tell him that you are?*" That is when the Voice says it: "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh" *—I am who I am.*

This is not a sermon on Exodus 3:14. But it is important to have some sense of the importance of that moment in the Bible and in the restraint that Jews show about uttering the name of God out loud and even in writing it on paper. God's response to Moses is an insistence that God will not be used or manipulated. It is a recognition that God is beyond all of our images of God—and not only beyond our unhelpful and false images. God is even beyond all of our helpful and true icons. The God we worship is a God who eludes our control and refuses to be domesticated, a God who is ultimately beyond the limits of human knowing and human language. So God tells Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

Flash forward to John's Gospel. As John portrays the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day, the heart of the matter is that Jesus sounds to their ears as if he is taking the Lord's name in vain, because he has this habit of saying, "I AM..." a lot in John's Gospel. (Forty-five times, to be precise.) Jesus simply says, "I AM" twenty-four times—without a predicate. So, to the Samaritan woman at the well we read in translation that Jesus says to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." But a more literal translation of the Greek would be something like this: "*I AM, the one speaking to you.*" (John 4:26) To the temple authorities on the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus says: *before Abraham was, I AM.* (John 8:58) To the soldiers who come to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking if he is the Messiah, he simply says, "I AM." (John 18:5) In English we may not get that this is a big deal but *twenty-four times* Jesus uses this phrase and for those who recall Moses at the Burning Bush it is a rather big deal.

In addition to those twenty-four times, Jesus says "I AM" an additional twenty-one times in John's Gospel *with* a predicate. These sayings are familiar and beloved by the Church and include the following:

- I AM the light of the world;
- I AM the door;
- 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 (you are the branches);

And, as we heard today, I AM the Bread of Life. Jesus is making the claim to be the true bread, the living bread that has come down from heaven, bread that will satisfy our deepest hunger. But this claim is part of a larger whole, all of those “I AM” sayings that insist that Jesus is holy, that he is indeed the way to God, a door, truth, life, light, vine...*and bread*.

Think of how tactile that particular image is. Think about the feel of kneading bread and about the smell of fresh-baked bread. When I was in seminary I baked bread often because I was around, and while baking bread requires time and presence it really doesn't require a lot of work. You mix and knead and wait; so if you've got studying to do, it's a perfect way to multi-task.

Bread is a metaphor, though, for more than what we make with flour and water and yeast. It's about all of the food that we eat, the food that nourishes our bodies. *Give us this day, our daily bread*, Jesus taught us to pray. (Or as we've been praying this past month, “With the bread that we need for today, feed us.”) More and more we are realizing that we really are what we eat. We are what we put into our bodies, for better and for worse. If we put candy and soda in our bodies we end up with corn syrup flowing through our veins!

I've been reading a very powerful memoir by an Episcopal priest named Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, called *Holy Hunger: A Woman's Journey from Food Addiction to Spiritual Fulfillment*. One of the things she says in that book is that as she began to recover from her addiction to food she began to see that the challenge was to eat with more awareness and care. It seems to me that advice is good counsel to anyone, regardless of what our own peculiar addictions may be. How can we learn to eat with more awareness and care?

This is the second summer that my family and I are making an effort to eat foods grown more locally by participating in a local C.S.A. We've eaten more kale and baby bok-choy in the past two summers than in all the prior years of my life combined. But it also makes us mindful, I think; more aware of the earth and more careful stewards of God's bounty. It has made me and I think my entire family more grateful for our daily bread and the gifts of this earth.

I like to remember (and to remind all of you) of the Middle English derivation of the word “companion.” If you've studied French or Spanish you recognize the middle part of that word—*pain or pan*—bread. A companion, then, is literally, is someone we “bread with”—someone we sit with at table to eat.

Many of us have been taught to think of God and the spiritual life as something apart from: we have been taught to bow our heads and close our eyes and in so doing we are subtly shutting out the material world in order to ponder “higher things.” But John's Gospel—in the beginning was the Word, remember, and the Word became *flesh* to dwell among us—we keep being pushed back to our daily lives where we are called to lift up our eyes and open them. Christian spirituality, especially in John's gospel is an *earthy* spirituality—it's not about contemplating some higher realm but about opening our eyes to see God's hand at work in the world around us. It is about nursing a newborn child and watching the face an infant makes when she eats her first prunes, or beets. It's about discovering Portuguese kale soup when you have more kale than you know what to do with, or shucking just-picked corn. It's about the smell of a slowly-cooked brisket or warm pasta with pesto.

Jesus spent a lot of time at table, not only with friends but all kinds of people from all walks of life. Our table experiences, too, have profound implications for what it means to be a part of a Eucharistic community such as this one. If Jesus is who he claims to be, if he really is “the Bread of Life,” then we who eat that bread really do become his Body. We are bound together: given by God, through Christ, to one another as companions along the way. How can our eating together be done with even greater awareness and care so that our eyes are opened and we behold who we are becoming: the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life?

We are companions to one another. Now as the community gathers on any given week that will ring in our ears as good news much of the time. We see people we’ve served on vestry with or knit prayer shawls with or participated in a Bible study with or someone we taught in Sunday School when they were in second grade. We come together to eat the bread and to share the cup and our hearts are glad that God has given us such companions; friends who have been there for us perhaps in difficult times and maybe even visited us when we were sick with chicken noodle soup or cooked up a meal for us when we were grieving.

But if we are honest (and at the very least worship requires that of us) then we must also admit that on any given week there may be people in our midst with whom we feel less comfortable. They may not be people we would ever invite to our home for a backyard barbecue. Or perhaps we served on vestry with them or were in a Bible study together or we knit prayer shawls with them or we taught them when they were in second grade. And it may not be that we have some big or deep conflict with them in need of reconciliation, although sometimes that happens. It may simply be that we just don’t like them very much, and the feeling may be quite mutual.

Now I’m being only a little bit tongue-in-cheek but the point is that “like” and “love” are not the same. I’ve been re-reading Paul Tillich’s little book entitled *Love, Power and Justice*. Like all good theologians, Tillich rejects the notion of love as merely emotional, as about feelings. He points out that if love was emotional then how could Jesus *command* it of us? You can’t command someone who doesn’t like kale to like it. You can make your kid eat it because it is good for them and you can eat it yourself because you want to be healthier but that isn’t going to make you *like* it any better. If love is only about *feelings*, Tillich says, then the Great Commandment is meaningless.

We are bound together for something much larger, and God’s mission in the world begins with the commandment that we love one another and that we recognize Christ in ourselves and in each other. As members of Christ’s Body, we are meant to become life-giving Bread for the world. Authentic Christian spirituality begins and ends at the Table where we are fed by Christ and nurtured into the full stature of Christ, so that we might not only satisfy our own hunger and thirst for God but that we might in turn share in the work of nourishing a starving world.