

“Lake Forest Has a Hunger Problem”
John 6: 51-58
August 20, 2006

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Lake Forest, Illinois

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever.

There is no mistaking a genuine moment of truth in a sermon. In that moment, when it arrives is as unmistakable as thunder and lightning on an August midnight. When the truth of what we think or believe is either powerfully challenged or reinforced. When we know that individually, and the whole congregation grasps what is happening, an unearthly quiet fills the sanctuary and soaks up any sound. That moment of truth is what we work and pray for. It is the sure sense that God is present, that something godly and transcendent has just happened. I experienced three of those moments in quick succession this last week. They did not happen in church, but during an outing with my grandchildren and children at Six Flags-Great America. Each of these eye-openers was an exercise in driving home the obvious, but we all forget and sometimes deny the obvious, being made to see it is profound. The first truth is that 64 year old males should think twice before spending 7 hours of a hot August day at Great America. This is the second, that 64 year old men should think twice before riding six roller coasters on the same day, the third moment of truth was provided by my seven-year old grandson who was too small to ride superman and superman was rollercoaster number 7 for me and I had already wilted by that time. So Carson and I sat forlornly on a bench watching the rest head for the queue. He poked my ribs with his elbow and pouted, "Grampa it is just not fair, I'm too little and you're too old."

We are nourished by the truth, even when the taste of it is bitter. Pastor Christine's mantra is, "Speaking the truth in love." I cannot imagine her advocating, "Speaking a lie in love." Yet deception is a way of life, a verbal art form at the beginning of the 21st century. Truth nourishes the soul and relationships even when it is difficult to hear. Truth is the good bread of life. Deceptions are poison. That is why Jesus said I am the bread of life, I am the way the truth and the life, linking bread, truth and life with the ancient "I am."

Those moments in worship and in life when we are all lifted far beyond any life experience that we would call normal, when our minds and souls are seized by the spirit of the moment and God's transcendent being is present; inspiring, convicting, freeing, and accepting us, in those moments we are feeding on the real everlasting bread of life. God is in those times and we know it, Jesus, the bread and cup of life is undeniably there and we know that. And it is so refreshing and so exciting that we want to shout from the rooftops. He lives, it is true, and we know it! Persons who have had that experience are changed. After that transformation begins, the church family watches you change and grow in exciting and unexpected ways. It is so joyfully fulfilling to hear Stephen ministers after returning from hospital visits. If a patient is listed as Presbyterian and has not had a pastoral call, they will be called on the days that our Stephen ministers are there.

This change can be even more immediate. After the sermon and following worship, persons who normally avoid the coffee hour to protect their shy souls, wander cautiously downstairs, because the preacher managed to let the grace of God's word work from the pulpit and our inward friend's heart was profoundly moved. The truth was sent and received; the bread of

life was offered and accepted. People need to find someone else who also feels like the power switch for their being has just been turned to the ON position. He or she does not want to discuss our construction project, or the White Sox, their soul is warming, in fact it is beginning to glow. These are new feelings and the promise of more where that came from is palpably real. However, they do not want to be the only one with this stirring within.

Loneliness is a chronic state of being in most human lives and the weight of carry it is backbreaking and heartbreaking. People desperately want to say something strange and earthshaking, and awesome and wonderful just happened to me. I heard her say it from that pulpit and I know that she was talking to me. For a while I became oblivious to our glorious windows and the wandering thoughts that I keep stored nearby so that I have some way to look interested even though I tuned out ten minutes ago."

When they arrive at fellowship hall they discover that many others share their experience and want to talk about it. They also discover that on many Sundays the person who preached the word is in the middle of a talk-back with others who also want more and that their presence is welcome and that there are no bad questions because all who are there including the clergy are pilgrims and seekers.

That intense spiritual experience my friends are a real face-to-face encounter with Jesus who is the great "I am" of the Old Testament except that Jesus weaves in other strands of the old tradition to tell us who he is, and how we receive him. This is how he identifies himself so that the great "I am" becomes the great Ah ha. Stay with me and we will also do some weaving with Jesus. Moses learned from God that his name for all time and for all who ask is "I AM." I AM will deliver his people from disaster. One of

those deliverance moments came when Israel was starving to death wandering in the desert, and in despair cried out to God and to anyone else who would listen that without food they would die. God's answer was the manna, a variety of natural dew, which the Israelites saw as the life saving gift of heavenly bread. Jesus said "I am the bread of life, like the manna of the exodus story, a gift sent by God which can save you. However, my salvation is not only compassion for physical starvation, but compassion for spiritual starvation as well."

While preparing for this sermon, I read your job description for Chris Chakoian, for Don, for Patrick Day, for Kent and for me. They are marching orders for a tremendous amount of work. In the past the ordained staff tried valiantly to fulfill those marching orders, but at some point many collapsed from raw fatigue and spiritual depletion. These days that is less likely to happen because the clergy meet for Bible study, prayer and soul-deep conversation. Our intent is to look for and receive the bread of life together so that we do not minister to you the church and with you the church out of depletion and confusion and hunger. The non-ordained staff experiences the same battle fatigue. We all meet once a month for a meal, and every week we pray together, ask where God has been active in our lives and work and listen to some very nourishing devotionals. We and they need to be fed.

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Lake Forest has a hunger problem, because all of humanity has a hunger problem and every class and community tries to deal with that aching hunger with whatever quick fixes they can find and afford. Those quick fixes which are usually the stuff of our addictions have never worked, do not work now, and never will work. That is one of those times when we ignore or deny the obvious. Why do you continue to try that which only creates greater hunger, and there is no such creature as enough.

We do have an answer to physical hunger but that answer is for those poor people out there. We do as much as we can, as well as we can, for all the people that we can. That is why we externalize the words hunger and bread. Jesus tells us to put bread on the table where there is none, but he also offers bread for the inner hunger, for the empty soul. That is why the church, this church has the ability to do both. I am convinced that we have the most trouble when we are hungry for the bread that truly satisfies but have chosen the quick fix manna.

I remember a time when that profound silence descended on this sanctuary. The speaker was not an ordained minister. Frank Sibley, Moderator of the Deacons, was speaking. And Frank said, "For years I have rolled a huge rock up a steep hill, afraid that it would crush me; I could not let go. The name of that rock is shareholder equity". Then I became Moderator

of the Deacons and discovered that there is more to life than I ever imagined through service to Christ. Frank had received the bread of life and in a powerful moment fed a hungry and needy congregation. That sanctuary was so very quiet. The church officers are reading a book titled, *A New and Right Spirit* by Rick Barger.

We close with his words, "Our schemes and plans to save ourselves in some way through success or materialism or the immortality project fail to deliver as promised. Yet we live by the grace of a God who deeply loves God's children.

To value us as children of God and to bring salvation to us in the here and now, God decided not to give a lecture, offer advice, or design a program. God gave us Jesus and the church—in a world where life has become so fragmented, cheapened and troubled, it is within the church and her story where healing, hope, laughter, truth, love, genuine community, human purpose and real life are found."

"I say to you, I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." AMEN