

Haydenville Congregational Church, Haydenville MA
Matilda Rose Cantwell
August 9, 2009
“The Bread of Our Lives”
John 6:35, 41-51

*May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable
in thy sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.*

Who is God?

Where does God come from?

What is eternal life?

These may seem like rather large questions to be taking on on a Sunday Morning in mid August, in a sermon, which we hope will be somewhere in the range of ten minutes. You may think I am biting off a little more than I can chew, so to speak. But let's suspend disbelief for a few minutes. For it is these three questions that are addressed in the passage from the gospel of John that Jim read to us this morning.

These are big questions, but Jesus had a this simple answer: *I am the bread of life.*

As we all know, bread is a central theme of our religious tradition, and almost all cultures have bread somewhere at their center. On world communion Sunday, a Sunday celebrated in Protestant Churches all over the world. We eat Halla from Israel, Chapatti from India, Tortillas from Mexico, Pita from Lebanon, and homemade loaves from Haydenville Massachusetts. Last week was communion Sunday – our denomination celebrates The Lords Supper, or the holy Eucharist one time a month. Some churches, like the Roman Catholic Church or the Disciples of Christ celebrate Holy Communion through the sharing of bread each and every worship service.

Sociologists and historians remind us that in the ancient world in which the gospel of John was written bread was the source of 50% of the calories in the diet of non-elite people, people like Jesus and his disciples and those who followed him. So according to this passage Jesus is not, as one preacher put it, representing himself as *the bread roll on the side plate of life*. Bread, made of grain, is a profound ancient symbol for life, for when agriculture and the cultivation of grain began in the Neolithic period, it was the marking of humanity as interdependent not only with nature, but with itself and one another. Agriculture represents the relationship between humans and humans as well as humans and earth, collaboration with the seasons and the work of human hands.

The current deliberate exclusion of “carbs” from our diets is a powerful symbol, I think, of some of the deprivation caused by the postmodern world – our bounty and the food industry’s desire to add and augment to what is already wholesome has lead us into nutritional imbalance. We are so often taught that more is better that we now must limit what we eat to stay healthy. For in fact the carbohydrates and the simple

protein, the units of energy found in whole grain bread are what give us energy to move and eat and live, and the other things – vegetables, fruits, and meats or cheeses and milk, are crucial, but in an agricultural society, secondary in availability, amount, and frequency of ingestion.

Gunilla Norris, in her book Becoming Bread from which Carol Rinehart read a section for our Opening Words last week, says: *Flour and salt – the makings of bread – were frequently brought to our early altars. The sacrifices were made in recognition of the fact that we are fundamentally creatures of need. These offerings were petitions for sustenance. We are dependent and vulnerable creatures...we are given only so much time. And to make this time matter, in order to really live, we need to give, we need to receive. We need to love. Bread, life and love and fused in the soul of human experience.*

I am the bread of life, says Jesus, he who comes to me shall not hunger...

As you may know, the gospel of John comes from a slightly different socio-cultural contact than the Synoptic Gospels. It is written slightly later and it was influenced by the Greco Roman culture in which Gods like Apollo and Zeus lived in an untouchable Godly realm. So the people murmur – *this is not a God-- Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? Isn't this a human being – how can he say he has come down from heaven?*

Yet If you know of a baby being born or if you have witnessed or known a loved one who has passed from this world onto the next and felt the presence of them in your life through your love and mourning and memories even when their bodies have shut down then surely you must have wondered if in fact God exists *in human beings-- within us, and between us.*

The temples and mountaintops and the hours spent alone are like meat and fish and cheese and meat and vegetables – crucial – but the bread of life, the central part of the meal. Is a human relationship--our human relationships--our connection to one another -- or sometimes to ourselves.

This may nor sound like good news, we might say given how I snap at my spouse, at how agonized I am at the behavior of my teenager, at how vexed I am by this relationship in which I am unheard, misunderstood, and betrayed . In my anger and disappointment at my own self... in the rage I might feel towards those everywhere, in every realm of this existence, that have shown nothing but brutality to their fellow human beings. How unsympathetic we are to those who seem simply impossible to get along with....and rightly so.

What is more, how are we to understand this given that so many suffer from a *deprivation* of relationships. We all suffer from some form of loneliness and isolation at one moment or another in our lives, even if we are surrounded by people. And sometimes, the agony of relating to one another is just to much to bear, for some, one betrayal too many makes for a slow retreat out of the world of relationships into a world that is solitary and narrow.

We all retreat at times into these confines, or go in the opposite direction,. Wildly seeking approval, comfort and company of anyone we can find. For sometimes the very thing that nourishes us can feel hard to digest. And yet, perhaps the severe dichotomy between benevolence and meanness, trust and mistrust, solitude and company is yet another one of our very human misunderstandings.

Perhaps in actuality, what is most significant is not *how many* relationships we have, *or even how nice*, and how self-sacrificing we are in them. Perhaps what this man Jesus wanted us to know was just that God does not abide apart from us, only in heaven and a transcendent realm, God exists literally in the connections we have with earthly beings – ourselves and each other.

Who is God? Where does God come from? What is eternal life?

If you asked Jesus, I believe he would answer as he does here in this passage – I am the bread of life. I am a person, and hence I am the proof that God is within and between us. God is induced, created, invoked, called up by our interactions. God is so tremendous that each moment must re-create and re-imagine God.

If you find this hard to get your head around hear this from 4th century monk names Evagrius who preached a sermon that went on for over an hour and finally, Feeling that he was getting nowhere with the congregation said “*God simply cannot be grasped by the mind, for if god could be grasped, he would be finite and therefore God would not be God.*”

Jesus says, no one can come to just me, unless God has drawn him. By the same token, Jesus later says, no one can come to God except through me. Yet no one can come to Jesus, except through God. Everyone who has heard and learned from God, comes to human connection to live out and manifest “God-ness”.

In case you are still thinking this is not good news, since you are mad at someone or someone is mad at you, or if you say I don’t believe in God, anyway--there cannot possibly be a God because tragedy and bad things happening to good people.

Consider this: some of you know the chronicles of Narnia by CS Lewis, the children’s stories of the four siblings who travel into another world. In the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe, after the four children are crowned kings and queen of Narnia, the youngest heroine, Lucy, is distraught because she has realized that her friend and compatriot, hero of the Narnian world, the lion Aslan has disappeared without her being able to say goodbye. To console Lucy, the fawn, Mr. Tumnus, says to Lucy, *my dear, one moment you’ll see him, one moment you won’t...after all, he is not a tame lion...*

This lion, this Christ figure, is not a tame lion...our relationships are often the hardest, wildest, most wrenching parts of our lives...yet they are where God is.

One preacher recently said the following: We sometimes take away from scripture and the tradition that God is this all knowing, detached, and omnipotent being floating about like great, albeit bored, primordial magician who needs a hobby

and on a lark creates the vast expanse of interstellar space out of nothingness. What is often missed in contemporary discussions is that while God, like the wild lion Aslan, is an infinite being, impossible to fully grasp, God's *independent greatness* led God to create a world, *not of dependence or independence, but of interdependence*. Hence the mysterious Holy Trinity God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, three separate entities, all interdependent with one another.

Being interdependent is not easy. It is not *dependence* – it does not grant our wishes or fill all our needs, and it is not *independence*, needing and requiring nothing ... it is not alone nor is it fused together.

If you have ever made bread, you know it needs yeast as well as flour and salt, you know it takes a lot of work and no matter what, each loaf is different. There is a rhythm and a motion to it. There is recipe and skill, a science and an art. There is time and patience involved.

So it is with relationships. Sometimes the relationships that most need kneading and rising and time and patience are the relationships we have to and with ourselves. Sometimes we are called to draw upon the God of that connection. Or sometimes it is the relationships with our loved ones – spouses, children. Co-workers – all those people in our lives that bring out, in ourselves and the other.

C. S. Lewis's Aslan figure whose wisdom and kindness is infinite, but who is not a tame lion Relationships are not tame. They are wild and challenging and sometimes, unpredictable, like bread at high altitude.

So we don't know who God is, quite. And we don't know where God comes from, exactly. Or what, and when, is eternal life. But if we want to know, we have the ingredients before us, in each other.

It is probably true that while there are some people that we cannot forgive and some relationships that cannot be mended and some evils that cannot be reconciled in this lifetime, yet I am convinced that we are called to patience and reverence and reciprocity and curiosity in all of our relationships. We are called to knead and stir those relationships every day of our lives – even if the hardest relationships that send us *not* back to the other, but to our relationship with ourselves.

We are called to respond to the misunderstandings, the irritation, the rage, the terror, each and every time it confronts us. While sometimes the best response is nothing but silent prayer, we are still in recognition of the interdependence of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit -- which is nothing other than the relationship between ourselves, the other, and that mysterious and ever rising thing between.

So let us approach each relationship with reverence and wonder. Even those that might scare, confuse, vex us or even enrage us. We must come to lair of the lion, to the altar of God, with respect and reverence for this-- the bread of life. The living bread come down from heaven.

Amen.