

“Bread of Life” John 6: 25-35 Rev. Janet Chapman 11/23/25

So I’m training my dog Sophie to catch balls in mid-air, with increasing difficulty, backwards, flips, and some low-key acrobatics. She absolutely loves it and a week ago, a fellow dog walker asked if I had considered signing her with the 49’ers? After the game against the Rams, he mumbled, it sure couldn’t hurt. But I believe there is hope for them. I’ve never had a dog like Sophie and it certainly makes for interesting walks. After seeing a Border Collie win America’s Got Talent in ‘23, it peaked my interest in the show and the breed. If you’ve never seen America’s Got Talent, it is an old-time talent show on steroids. The contestant who gets “voted through” to the final round, beating out the competition, wins a million dollars and a chance to headline a show in Vegas. Over the years, the show seems to have gotten bigger, brighter and even more dangerous week by week. It used to be just jugglers, singers, gymnasts and dancers. Now those acts that get “voted through” include some who are at risk of severe injury, including jugglers who simultaneously swallow fire and acrobatic couples who hoist one another to death defying heights by their teeth. I’m sure my dentist would disapprove of both. After each act, the judges give feedback – it’s almost always the same advice: “Make it bigger, make it better, up the ante, wow us more or you won’t make it to the next round.”

This week’s text in John 6: 25-35 is Jesus’ second appearance on the biblical talent show. His first appearance was last week when he multiplied the five loaves and two fish to feed 5000 people. Alyce McKenzie asks a valid question at this point. Why didn’t the crowd put two and two together and recognize Jesus had just performed a sign that pointed to his divine identity? Why didn’t they confess their faith in him on the spot the first time around? They “ooh” and “aah” over him as a prophet, but that recognition doesn’t do him full justice especially as their stomachs are growling again. Maybe the hungry crowd didn’t notice what he was doing for their neighbors, feeding all 5000, because they were too busy stuffing their own faces with bread and fish. It is the danger, after all, in Thanksgiving with all that stuffing going on – we forget who made it all possible. The renewed stomach growls are the crowd’s

signal to seek Jesus out again. They follow him and, when they find him, he chastises them for seeking him out for the wrong reasons. While he filled their stomachs with food, they didn't allow their hearts and minds to be filled with faith. In response, rather than apologize or come to their senses about who he is, they insult him. They say, in effect, "So prove it. Prove that you are the Holy One God has sent into the world to save us. What sign will you do for us so we may see it and believe you? What work will you perform?" They speak to him like he is some kind of talent show contestant. "Let's see your talent again, Jesus. If it holds our interest, we won't push the red buzzer, and we'll vote you through to the next round." Very insulting, indeed.

Not once in all the times I've watched "America's Got Talent" has a contestant said to the judges, "Now what are you going to do for me? This isn't just a one-way street. This isn't just you sitting here and being impressed and entertained by me. What will you bring to the table?" Jesus responds by breaking the mold. He demands that this "audience," if you will, should do some work. To receive the food that will nourish them to eternal life, they need to bring belief to the table. He answers them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the One whom God has sent." But sadly, they are a passive, even lazy, crowd. They don't want to do that much. They just want to make demands for more: "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." This text has no happy ending. The crowd doesn't realize Jesus' identity and vote him into their lives and hearts. Jesus reminds them, "But I said to you that you have seen me and yet you still do not believe." Nothing will change in this story until the crowd gets in on the act, until they do some work and believe. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," and I feel like this is far more a beginning than an ending.

Bread is such a central part of Jesus' teachings throughout his ministry. Have you ever noticed how many bread stories are in the Gospels? There are dozens of them, even after you take out the parallel stories that show up in one or more Gospels. Bread was at the heart of every meal, sometimes used like a spoon, to scoop food into your mouth. A meal was never complete without bread. But even more than that, in Jesus' day, you could tell how much people earned by the kind of bread they ate. Rich

people ate bread made from fine-milled wheat flour. Poor people ate coarse barley cakes, or even worse, a handful of parched grain they had to pretend was bread. These days most of us get our bread from the grocery stores but in Jesus' day, no such luck. You made what you could with what you could afford. If you had land, that was great. You could grow your own grain and sell the extra to someone else. If you had no land, you had to depend on people who did. You paid what they charged, or you did without. Bread was so central to people's lives that there was no way to talk about politics, economics, class, or religion without eventually getting around to who had enough bread and who did not. Thus, it was not possible to talk about bread for long without talking about the justice of systems that awarded some people with plenty of bread and left others with none. In those days, the prayer "give us this day our daily bread" was not some sentiment printed on a calendar in the kitchen. It was a prayer you prayed for your children's lives. You prayed to be fed so you could feed them as well. This is probably why Jesus used bread as a teaching metaphor in so many of his lessons. If you follow the breadcrumbs in the scriptures, it is hard to believe he was only interested in the health of people's eternal souls. Follow the breadcrumbs and you will come to believe he was also just as dedicated to the health of people's God-made bodies on earth.

Among all the bread stories of Jesus', we ironically find a "no-bread" story. As Jesus sends his disciples out two by two to minister in his name, he tells them to "take no bread." Barbara Brown Taylor points out how odd that is if you think about it. Shouldn't he have blessed some bread and tucked it in their backpacks in case they or someone else needed it – like some super loaf that just kept multiplying in the backpack and never ran out? But Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, he tells them to take no bread. Maybe he didn't want them to start thinking of themselves as the "haves," going to bestow their bounty on the "have nots?" Maybe he wanted to keep them humble, to ensure they had to rely on the kindness of strangers instead of supplying their own needs. Thus, when they arrived in a new town, without bread, they would either find someone with a hospitable heart, or they would go to bed hungry. What

better training could he have devised for future feeders of humanity than to remind them that when God answered their prayer for daily bread, God did it thru others? Herein is a reality often missed by Jesus' followers: Jesus never turns stones into bread, not in the wilderness temptations, not on the beach, not anywhere. He never makes manna rain from heaven nor creates food out of nothing. He always works with what his disciples give him. When he asked his disciples to feed the 5000, they give him exact numbers. They only have 2 fish and 5 loaves, but he ignores their math along with their insecurity and asks them to bring what they have. Then he makes more of it without ever cutting the disciples out of the equation. Jesus' miracles always depend on the willingness of his followers to give him what they have, because he too "takes no bread." He carries no bottomless backpack full of Super Bread so he can be the one-man solution to a world of need. Instead, he relies on his followers to remember what he taught them when he sent them out: When the prayer for daily bread is answered, God always does it through others. When Jesus says, I am the bread of life, it is not a statement identifying his singular life. It is a statement directly connected to the role he calls his disciples to do and be. He is challenging them to walk in his footsteps, to be and share bread to a hungry world. You and I, when we partner with others, can become the bread of life to those in need because of what Jesus did. If that wasn't true, if Jesus didn't believe we were capable of representing the bread of life, he would have just snapped his fingers and created bread out of nothing, showing he was the only way the world would ever get fed. Instead, he equips us thru the Holy Spirit to be and share bread as he did, using all the talents, skills, and work we can contribute. You see, when you share bread, the bread opens up. When the bread opens up, so does the table. When the table opens up, so does your heart. When your heart opens up, so do your hands. Those hands share some of what you have with someone else – only to discover that you have more than what you started with. This is how the miracle goes on happening, again and again. You follow the breadcrumbs, and they lead you to life, not only for you but for those in need. Nothing changes in our story until we get in on the act. We have to come out of the audience and onto the stage. And when we do, we don't have to perform superhuman death-defying feats, we just need to believe. You are the bread of life.