

**Sermon Title:** The Questions We Ask  
**Scripture:** John 6:24-38  
**Location:** Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church  
**Date:** August 5, 2018  
**Preacher:** Grace Boyer

Think of all the different types of bread there are in the world: Rye, wheat, sourdough, biscuits, buns, banana bread, nut bread, garlic bread, flatbreads, bagels, croissants, pita bread, rolls, and now even gluten free breads. And the list goes on.

When I was in graduate school I had a classmate who brought her sourdough bread starter all the way from her home in California to our school in Richmond, Virginia. She diligently kept the starter alive in her dorm room, feeding it the flour it needed to continue to live. And regularly she would bake a batch of bread in the dorm kitchen, and the whole dorm would smell absolutely wonderful! The students, who were from around the country and around the world, would gather for a sample, drawn by the smell of the freshly baked bread.

For me, growing up in Korea, bread was not a part of my daily life in childhood. Depending upon where you lived, it was sometimes hard to get access to. The Korea of my childhood lived off of rice and barley, whether cooked, puffed, or fermented. When my mother did go into town and return with a loaf of bread, it felt more like a delicacy. We would each tear off a segment of the warm bread, and devour the loaf right then and there. It wasn't a part of daily life, but the food of celebration.

When my family returned to the United States, I became used to sliced bread and sandwiches on a more regular basis. But my real understanding of bread as a part of daily life came when I was an adult volunteering in human rights work in Israel/Palestine, in the West Bank, in Hebron. One of my responsibilities for our team was to get the daily bread. So at 6:00 am each morning I would walk to the open market where the local bread makers all had their carts out, and buy the bread our team would need for the day.

Now this was not loaf bread. It resembled in shape the Pita bread you get in grocery stores here, but trust me, the consistency and taste are completely different. This was piping hot pita bread that had been baked over hot stones or in earthen ovens that morning, and it melted in your mouth. I would bring it back to the apartment where we lived and the team would devour it for breakfast. By lunch, the bread was a bit stiffer, but still worked well to stuff for sandwiches. By supper, you needed to dip the bread in olive oil or soup for it to be good. And by the next morning, it wasn't that appetizing, and fairly crusty. It was something that you ate the day you got it. And so it was a tricky balance of getting enough to feed us for a day, but no more.

In the Bible, when it speaks of daily bread, it is this type of bread. And sometimes day laborers would be paid in bread at the end of the day rather than money. They would be paid enough bread to feed their family for a day. "Give us this day our daily bread," the Lord's Prayer says. And it takes us back even further to the Old Testament when the Israelites were in the wilderness, hungry for food, and God sent manna, small disks of bread flakes each morning for the Israelites to collect enough for the day, but not so much that there would be leftovers that would spoil.

These two ideas or stories, the daily wage bread and this manna from heaven bread in the wilderness serve as the backdrop for all we hear in John chapter 6. At the beginning of John 6 is the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with five barley loaves and two fish. Then after that encounter, the disciples get in the boat without Jesus to go back to their home base in Capernaum, and the crowd sleeps. During the night, as the storm rages on the sea, Jesus walks out to join the disciples, the story Steve preached on last week.

So the next morning, the crowds that had been fed the day before, fed to fullness, wake up, and they begin to search for Jesus. Confused about where everyone has gone, they head to Capernaum to try to find him, and when they do, their first question to Jesus is, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" They know he didn't get in the boat with his disciples, they can't quite figure it out, so "when did you come here?"

And with this simple question begins a back and forth dialogue that spans all of John chapter 6. Today we only read a portion of it. But the back and forth between the crowd and Jesus fits into the gospel of John's theme of miscommunication. Of two people talking past each other, or on different levels, not really communicating. If you remember the old baseball comedy routine of Abbott and Costello about "Who's on first, What's on second, I don't know on third".... that type of miscommunication is what the gospel of John is famous for. Jesus speaking on one level, the people on another.

Ever have one of those conversations? Sometimes it's funny, like Abbott and Costello. Sometimes it's heartbreaking when you realize you haven't been heard. That is what is going on in John 6.

The crowd's first question to Jesus is "when did you come here?" It is a concrete question, a practical question. And Jesus listened to it, but then he goes below the surface to what they are really asking and replies, you aren't really looking for me, are you? You are looking for food. You aren't really looking for me as a person, or as a rabbi, or a representative of God. It's not about trying to find me, it's not even about understanding what really happened yesterday when you were filled with bread. It's all about your stomachs. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." It is like Jesus and the crowd are talking on different levels.

In the back and forth conversation that ensues and continues into next week's passage, the crowd keeps throwing practical questions at Jesus. "What must we do to perform the works of God?" "What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe you?" "What work are you performing?" All their questions are asking for a set formula, a set of instructions. They want to know what they have to do to get that bread again. In the end, it's all about food to them.

And in the face of all these questions, Jesus keeps offering them himself instead. His presence. His heart. Jesus responds, it's not about work, it's not about a formula, it's a gift. It's about seeking me, about coming to me. It's about knowing me, Jesus said. I am the bread of life. You have come asking what I can do for you. You've seen the bread I gave you, but you haven't perceived it as a sign of God's presence acting in your midst. You have misunderstood my purpose.

Now there is nothing wrong with practical questions. If your stomach is hungry, all you can think of is food and how to get your next meal. If you are sick, you want to be made well. If you are homeless, all you can think of is where you will sleep. If you are threatened, all you can think of is survival and finding safety. It's the hierarchy of needs that every teacher learns. You must meet that basic need first. And Jesus does. In all the gospels we see Jesus healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching the confused, meeting the basic needs in his compassion.

So in this question and answer and talking past each other, Jesus doesn't say that the crowd's questions are wrong. It is more like he says, now that I have fed you, ask bigger questions, life giving questions. Go deeper, go larger, go riskier. Ask who I am? Who God is? What is God like? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Or even societal questions like why is there hunger, why is there injustice in the land so that people are hungry and thirsty, and sick and poor in large quantities? Ask these questions. It's not that the questions the crowd asked weren't important: the next meal, the rules for interaction, the type of work. But these are daily questions. Risk to ask the big picture

questions. Because some things feed us for a day, some feed us for a lifetime. What are the questions that feed for a lifetime? That is what Jesus is getting at.

Jesus' whole mission on earth in the gospel of John is to be a sign pointing to God, to reveal God, to help people see what God is like, the heart of God, the character of God in their midst, so that they can make sense of life. I am the Bread of Life, Jesus says, bread of a lifetime. Not just the day or the moment.

What are the things that feed you? Lifetime fed, not just lunch? A relationship where you are loved and accepted? Nature? The hug of a grandchild? Learning or experiencing something new? Work or a cause that gives a sense of meaning and purpose? Something of beauty? Conversation?

I was fed in my time in Hebron. Each morning after breakfast we would have our devotions together and put the day into God's hands, and then go out to do our work. Each night around the dinner table we would process the day, and see what we needed to do differently. And then ... we would laugh. Silly laughter. Laughter that makes you bend over and start crying. It's hard to explain this kind of laughter. It's emergency room type of laughter, it's warzone laughter, it's the laughter that comes because if you don't laugh you will cry all the time from the injustice, and the violence, and the death, and the fear, and all that surrounds you. It's not a laughter that diminishes or makes fun of the situation. It's a laughter that is life giving, life affirming, and feeding. Reminding you that you are alive, and human, and life is precious. And so as a team we would process our work day, and give it to God. We were all in it together, trying to make sense of life and scripture, and faith and doubt, and we were supporting each other and laughing at the silliest things because they were real and life giving. Over the years, it's been groups like this that fed me in a way that food doesn't. What feeds you?

That's what Jesus was pressing the crowd toward with their questions. Yes, I fed you bread. But now that you have eaten, ask the deeper questions, the questions that will sustain you when there isn't food on the table.

I think that is part of what it means to be church together. To ask the deeper questions. To find that soul food. It's not always about the answers, but the relationships we build with God and each other when we ask the questions together. Deeper, fragile, vulnerable questions. Questions that get at the heart of what is driving us, or making us restless, or fearful, or hopeful. Not just daily bread, but the Bread of Life questions.

As we come to the Communion Table today, we are reminded of the God who sustains us and cares about our daily needs. But also a God who encourages us to ask the lifetime questions. So much of the time we ask small questions, and expect nothing much from God. Dare to ask the big questions. Expect great things from God. And come back to the table as often as you need to: for breakfast, lunch, and supper.