

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

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John 6:35, 41-51

If you were to drop by the Edington household on a Friday evening at dinnertime, we would certainly invite you to join us at our table. There a fairly high probability that the menu for the meal would be stir-fry. It's kind of tradition that at the end of the week, I prepare a large skillet of stir-fry. And, of course, we call it Stir-Friday.

Once you get the hang of it, stir-fry is pretty simple. We go with beef or chicken, broccoli, carrots, and water chestnuts. However, for the past year-and-a-half, locating water chestnuts has been hit-or-miss. I shop at the Kroger near our house, and it has become too common to discover that the inventory of water chestnuts has been wiped clean. It's not the end of the world. We can certainly have stir-fry without water chestnuts. (They are good, though.)

Water chestnuts have become victim of the many supply chain issues that have recently plagued our world. Water chestnuts are grown on small farms in inland China. There is a truck shortage in China. Then they have to cross the ocean, and container ships are stacked up waiting to unload at ports on the West Coast. There is a shortage of truck drivers in the US. Plus, the Kroger has a shortage of staff to stock the shelves. Honestly, it is a miracle that those little cans make it here at all.

We've also seen shortages of pasta because extreme weather has affected the production of durum wheat. Coffee futures spiked this week.

Over the past year-and-a-half, we've become accustomed to shortages and price increases. It started with the great toilet paper crisis of 2020. Then there was the computer semi-conductor shortage which affected the production of everything from cars to video games. The roots of that shortage were COVID plus a drought in Taiwan.

If you've tried to build anything recently, you are painfully aware of the rise in the price of lumber. When COVID hit, sawmills were forced to cut production as workers got sick. But people stuck at home had extra cash because they couldn't vacation or travel so they started building decks and additions and remodels which drove up the demand for wood. Lower interest rates drove up demand for new construction. Add in supply chain issues and suddenly I walk into Home Depot and see that a common 2 x 4 is selling for six bucks.

I could go on, but you know what I'm talking about. We've all experienced not having something this past year. And it is especially disconcerting when the grocery

store doesn't have a food item in stock that they normally carry. That's food. We need food.

Food is so integral to our lives that it is not just part of our culture, it is part of our faith. From beginning to end, we can find references to food throughout our Bible. Why is this? It is because without food we would surely perish. God uses food in the ongoing conversations with God's people. For example, God commanded the first people not to eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. But they do. When the Israelites are fleeing Egypt, God commands them to roast a lamb and have a meal. In the story of Daniel, Daniel, a captive in the court of the king of Babylon, refuses to eat the food from the king's kitchen. It is not the food of his God. In the 23rd Psalm, the psalmist praises God for preparing a table—a meal—in the face of his enemies. Throughout scripture, God uses food in the telling of God's story.

Food is a source of sustenance. It is the fuel that powers our bodies. Without food we grow weak and quickly die.

Because of the importance of food in our lives, it is also a ritual for us. We bond around food. Meals are a building block for community. If you want to get to know someone, you share a meal with them.

It is because of the significance of food in our lives that it is especially powerful when Jesus makes the proclamation, *I am the bread of life*. Jesus draws on our deep relationship with food when he connects himself to bread—one of our oldest and most common foods. Here, Jesus is making the claim that, like bread, he is crucial to life. But he is not just any bread, he is *the bread from heaven*.

When the people hear Jesus say *bread from heaven*, they would immediately recall the story of their ancestors' trek across the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, from slavery to freedom, from a place without God to a place with God. As you will remember, that journey was not without its significant challenges. The trip took far longer than they expected. And then there was the matter of food. There was not enough of it. Out in the wilderness, away from Egypt, the people were facing a food shortage. The people complained to God and God answered by sending them food in the form of manna—manna, that bread from heaven. Each day, the people would wake up and find the manna lying across the landscape for them to gather and eat. They were only to gather enough for that day. If they tried to stockpile the manna it would quickly spoil. Everyone was dependent each day on God for the manna. This daily manna sustained the people in their journey to salvation. The manna served as a continual reminder of God's covenant—the promise that God would watch after them.

And today, we hear Jesus proclaim that he is now that *bread from heaven*. He says, *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*. Unlike the manna which had a shelf life, Jesus is eternal.

But Jesus sets himself apart from just regular bread. To a starving person, bread may be the difference between life and death. But Jesus is talking about a different life. He says to the people, “Do you remember the story about how your ancestors in the wilderness were fed each day by God’s manna? God sustained them through their journey. But ultimately, they did die. They died at the end of their lives.

Jesus points out that not only is he the bread from heaven, he is more. He is the bread of life. He says, *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.* That is the promise of our faith. We follow the one who offers more than worldly wealth and comfort. We put our faith in the one who offers salvation—eternal salvation.

We put this belief into practice through the sacrament of communion. Together, we eat the bread that represents Jesus and that great promise of salvation.

Today is World Communion Sunday. When we gathered at the table we do so in the belief that the church of Jesus Christ is universal. It is not Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Methodist, or Catholic, or Orthodox. It is open and available to all.

As followers of Christ, as we receive the *bread from heaven* we are also called to share that bread with others.

For the fourth year in a row, in two weeks, on Saturday October 16, we will gather in our Fellowship Hall to literally make bread in the name of Christ. We are going to assemble 10,000 meals for the organization called Rise Against Hunger. These prepackaged meals of rice and dried vegetables will be sent to some location in our world where food is in short supply. If I were to guess, the food we package will likely go to Haiti.

In normal times, Rise Against Hunger has a million meals in their warehouses ready to ship. Because of COVID, their cupboards are bare. They are shipping as fast as they can get the food. Our job will be first of all to gather here in two weeks and measure, weigh, and package food. Our second job is to raise \$3500. That is just 35 cents per meal. I can’t think of a better use for your money. We still need to raise about \$1000. I need to be generous.

These meals are not gourmet, but they are sufficient. They are like manna—they meet the needs for the day and allow people to continue the journey out of whatever wilderness they find themselves in.

As those of you who have participated in Rise Against Hunger before know, making meals is fun. We gather at tables and make food. Some get here early to unload the truck and set everything up. We visit with friends; we make friends. We build community. And, last but not least, we wear hair nets. There is a joy to our work knowing that it serves a purpose.

I am so very proud not just to call myself a follower of Christ but to be part of this particular congregation. We don't just embrace our Savior for ourselves, we respond joyfully in discipleship and in servanthood. We are not just *hearers of the word* but, as we read in the Letter of James, we are *doers of the word* (James 1:22-25).

When I go to the grocery and can't find what I need, I don't get upset. Not having is a reminder of how much I do have. I'm certainly not going to starve because I can't find the water chestnuts. When I encounter a gap on the shelves, I now offer a prayer for the too many people in this world who live every day with too little to eat.

Jesus says to his followers, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* Let us always answer the call to dine at the table with our Lord. Amen.