

The I Ams of Jesus: The Bread of Life

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 6:25-40

There's lots going on in this passage, but this morning I want to look at this story from a little bit of a different angle. I want us to see how Jesus is teaching the crowds about the true nature of faith. At the beginning of the passage the crowds have a kind of surface level faith and as the story unfolds Jesus is pushing them down to the center of things. Let's start on the surface.

Jesus has just crossed over the Sea of Galilee. He's been on the opposite side of the Sea where he performed a feeding miracle. He fed 5000 people with five loaves and two small fish. Even though he started with this little bit of food, everyone ate and was satisfied and, somehow, there were 12 baskets of bread left over! People were pretty excited. There was a buzz in the crowd and afterwards, John tells us, some people wanted to make Jesus a king. Jesus did what he usually did when people tried to make him a king: he slipped away. He went to the other side of the lake to Capernaum. The crowds soon realized what had happened so they got in their boats, and sped to the other side of the lake to find Jesus. In verse 25 they find him. "Hey Jesus! There you are! When did you get here?" Jesus doesn't seem to be happy about being found. "I know why you're here. You're not really looking for me; you're here because you want more bread. It's not me you want; it's the bread. It's not me you want; it's the yummy things I give you!" Jesus shakes his head in frustration. "*Do not work for the food which spoils, but for the food which endures to eternal life which the son of man will give you.*"

The crowd exhibits what we might call the bread level of faith. Are the people in the crowd followers of Jesus? Yes, they are. What else would you call them! They just followed Jesus across a lake! They are actually pretty dedicated! I would call their level of interest in Jesus high. But their interest in Jesus is at that most basic surface level. They're less interested in Jesus and more interested in bread. And before we are too hard on them, let's admit that we are all like this. My daughter Abby is in Honduras with a group of Calvin students. She will be studying there until May. The classes take place in Tegucigalpa, which is one of the most dangerous cities in Central America. Guess what I do every single day? Like the crowds, every morning I go out to find Jesus. It's not hard to do. I don't have to cross a lake or anything like that; I just close my eyes and fold my hands and there he is. Guess what I ask for when I find him? I ask for bread. "Lord, please take care of Abby." And then I pray for my other kids and other family members. I ask for help in my daily work as a pastor and as a Father and a husband. I am sure that you ALL do something exactly like this. What are we doing when start our day this way? We are chasing down Jesus and asking for bread. We are asking for food and shelter and safety for ourselves and for the people we love. AND THAT'S OK! After all, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus wants us to pray for our family, for our children, for our jobs, for the stuff we need to get us through the day. That is definitely a part of the life of faith. But our faith can't remain on that surface level. If your faith life never gets much deeper than coming to him and asking for bread, then your faith will be a brittle thing. If you root your faith in Jesus' gift of bread and health and safety, what happens when the bread stops? What happens to your faith when your health fails, or someone you love has something happen to them, or the bread becomes scarce? Will you keep looking for Jesus? Or will you walk away? That's what happens to a lot of people, right? They follow Jesus because they think that Jesus is the one who will

give them their heart's desire. In the short term, their bread-based faith can be really intense, like the crowd chasing Jesus across the lake. But when Jesus doesn't give them their heart's desire, they lose interest. (That's certainly what happens in the gospels. When Jesus stops giving bread the same crowd that was chasing him for bread starts calling for his crucifixion.)

Jesus knows this of course and so he pushes them to go deeper. Look at verse 27. The crowds find Jesus, and Jesus turns to them and says, "Very truly I tell you." This is a Greek expression which amounts to Jesus saying, 'Listen very carefully to what I am about to say!!!' Then he says, "You are looking for me not because you saw the signs I performed, but because you ate the loaves and fishes and had your fill." "You're here for more bread, but you're missing the significance the bread. That bread was a sign! It wasn't just given to fill your tummy; it was given to show you something deeper!"

It seems like the crowd gets Jesus' point here, and they actually try to respond. Their response moves them to the second level of faith. Look at verse 28. The crowd tries to go deeper. "*What must we do to do the works God requires?*" "Ok Jesus, you're right. We are a little shallow here. The bread was great, but we know that this is about more than bread. We're sorry for being focused on our own needs. We promise to do better, so tell us what we need to do." Full credit to the crowd here - they are taking another step. They don't want to be the kind of disciple who gives up when the weather gets stormy and the bread runs out; they want to be men and women of resilient faith who ride out into the storms of life with their head held high and the sword of the Spirit in their hand! "What do we need to do!?" "Here I am Lord! Send me!!"

Let's call this the passionate commitment level of faith. At this level you realize that faith is not a walk in the park, faith is a wholehearted commitment to the ways of the Lord! "I have decided to follow Jesus!" No turning back. You see this deeper dimension of faith at youth group events. A whole room full of young people who've been mostly passive in their faith - listening to parents and accepting what their teachers say - suddenly hear this call to go deeper, to claim the gospel and the work of Christ for themselves, and they rise up. They will go out there and make a difference! They will change the world for God! And this too is an essential part of faith. Jesus talks about this part of faith. "*If anyone would come after me, that person must pick up their cross and follow!*" "*The fields are ready for harvest. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send forth workers!*" "*Come you who are blessed by my Father and take your inheritance! For I was and you gave me something to eat! I was a stranger and you invited me in!*" Healthy faith needs this passionate, active side. If we don't have some of this passion and willingness to sacrifice, our faith can't be fully formed.

Nevertheless, faith isn't centered in this activity and passion. I had an older minister friend named George. George was a dedicated pastor. He loved the church and he worked for her morning noon and night. He faithfully visited the sick, preached the gospel, and walked beside people living in the shadow of death. He was also a great churchman. He served on all sorts of committees. He loved going to classis and synod meetings! Synod and classes are the governing bodies of the church. George loved them. He was one of the few ministers I know who *wanted* to be synodical delegate. When the local ministers were asked "Who wants to go to synod this year, most of us ministers would slump down in our chairs and try not to make eye contact with the person asking the question. Not George. George would raise his hand and say "OOO! OOO! OOO! Pick me!" I think he went to synod more than 20 times in his ministry, and when he was there, he was passionate and active. Eventually time came for George to retire. He said good-bye to pastoral ministry and tried to settle down. It didn't go very well. He struggled. Depression set in and he did terrible battle with his moods. And then one day George disappeared. He left his

home on his bike and no one could find him. He was missing for months until one day someone found his bike and his body in a remote part of the woods. He'd taken his own life.

This can't be about what we do. No matter how passionate and active we are, this can't be about what we do. If faith is rooted in our passion and activity there is no hope for me or you or my friend George. Because we are frail instruments, our wills waver. Our bodies grow weary. Sometimes we get taken over by addiction. Sometimes bitterness or anger consumes us. And sometimes our brain chemicals go haywire, we get fogged in by anxiety or depression and we do tragic, inexplicable things. But here's where Jesus shows us the beautiful heart of things. With the crowd we ask, "*What must we do to do the work which God requires, to be God-approved people?*" And Jesus doesn't tell us to do anything. He doesn't tell us to go on some great pilgrimage or quest. He doesn't give us some great work of righteousness that we must accomplish. Instead, he holds out to us a piece of bread and he says, "Eat this. I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never go hungry and who ever believes in me will never be thirsty. This is my body, given for you. Take, eat, remember and believe." This gift of Grace, this gift that Jesus gives to all of us at the cost of his life is the deep place where faith finds its center. This gift of grace holds me and you and George. This gift of grace is unshakeable. Every week in church we work at the other two levels of faith. Every week we pray for daily bread for you and your family. We pray for their health and safety and well-being. We call you to passion and activity; to give yourself for the life of the world, to share the love of Jesus, to work for justice, to participate in the life of the church. But the most important thing we do here, and I hope that we do it every week, is hold up for you the free gift of grace that is yours in Jesus. Every week in the word, and in the water and sometimes in the bread, we hold up the unshakeable love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord and we say, 'This is for you.' Today Jesus invites you again to come to this table and remember where your hope is rooted. It doesn't matter what you've done, or what you've left undone. Come to this table, receive this gift of Grace and let the eternal life of Jesus start to take root in you.

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