

I AM...The Bread of Life
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Selected Verses from John 6

Today we begin our sermon series for the month of July on the I AM sayings of Jesus. The use of “I am” is one of the main ways Jesus reveals himself throughout the Gospel of John. He deliberately uses these statements to make a direct connection with the divine name of God used in the Old Testament, where God identified himself as “I am who I am,” and said that this would be God’s name forever, through all generations (Exod 3:14-15). By using the “I am” statements, Jesus is revealing himself to the people as the One in whom God is visible and made known.

Often throughout the Gospel, including our passage for today, the “I am” is followed by a common symbol found during Biblical times. Jesus knew these examples would best speak to the people. Today we will focus on the saying “I am the bread of life.” This is a long chapter where a lot happens—from the miraculous feeding to Jesus walking on water to Jesus revealing himself as the bread of life—with much more in between. For the sake of time, I will read selected verses of this chapter, but I encourage you to go back on your own and read it all the way through. We will pick up our reading today within the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Hear now the word of God:

¹¹ Then Jesus took the [boy’s] bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted. ¹² When they had plenty to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather up

the leftover pieces, so that nothing will be wasted.”¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves that had been left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴ When the people saw that he had done a miraculous sign, they said, “This is truly the prophet who is coming into the world.”¹⁵ Jesus understood that they were about to come and force him to be their king, so he took refuge again, alone on a mountain.

The next part that we'll skip over today is the well-known part when Jesus walks on water. One of the important things to note is that during this passage a large crowd keeps following Jesus everywhere. The day after the miraculous feeding and the walking on water, they even got in boats to search for him, which is where we enter the story again.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”²⁶ Jesus replied, “I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted.”²⁷ Don't work for the food that doesn't last, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

²⁸ They asked, “What must we do in order to accomplish what God requires?”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “This is what God requires, that you believe in him whom God sent.”

³⁰ They asked, “What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*”

³² Jesus told them, “I assure you, it wasn’t Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ They said, “Sir, give us this bread all the time!” ³⁵ Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving Lord, who is the Great I AM, open our eyes and ears and hearts and minds this morning, that we might hear your word for us today. In your most holy name we pray, Amen.

Sermon

One of our favorite games to play in our house is hide and seek. Because we have a 3-year old, the rules are pretty relaxed. The seeker may or may not count all the way to 20 before searching. The hiders may make some noise to help the seeker find them, or even hide in similar spots every time. And one thing is almost always certain in a household full of girls, which is that there is a lot of exciting squealing upon finding and being found.

In a way, there's a game of hide and seek going on in the Gospel according to John. You could even call it the "seekers" gospel. Throughout John's account, people seek Jesus out again and again in an effort to understand him. The question of his identity, who he is and where he came from, is the central theme throughout. This is true in our passage for today as well. An inquiring crowd follows Jesus everywhere. They first find him when he had retreated to the mountain with his disciples.

When Jesus was there, he looked up and saw a large group of people coming towards him. And even worse, he sensed they were hungry. Can you imagine a crowd of 5,000 hungry people expectantly approaching you? Look around—our sanctuary can hold about 1,000 people. Imagine our sanctuary full of people times five. That's a lot of hungry mouths to feed. And one thing I've noticed is that hungry stomachs and a happy attitude rarely go together. There's a reason we try to end our worship service before lunch time. We're smart enough to know that we don't want a mob of hungry people by the end!

Jesus was smart enough to anticipate the crowd's needs, and so he became the host of their meal. He miraculously turned a little boy's 5 loaves of barley bread and 2 fish into a feast for this crowd of thousands. And the text doesn't say that everyone got barely enough. It says they got as much as they wanted until they were completely satisfied. And then, even more miraculously, John tells us there were leftovers enough to fill 12 baskets. The people were so full and happy that they were ready to make Jesus their king. But he knew they wanted this for the wrong reasons, and so Jesus quickly withdrew to the mountain to be by himself. And it was later that dark and windy evening when he walked on water, calming the rough seas, in order to join his disciples who were miles away as they rowed their boat to the other side.

So when Jesus did not automatically appear to the crowd in the same spot the next day, they once again set out to find him. This time they took boats to seek him out on the other side of the lake. This crowd seems a little like primitive paparazzi. It appears they would travel in any shape, manner or form to find Jesus and to question him like reporters. I imagine Christ found this both endearing and probably a little bit irritating as well.

When they caught up with him, they pelted him with questions, first wanting to know when he had arrived on this side of the sea. And in typical Jesus fashion, he did not answer them directly. Instead, he chastised them for looking for him only because they wanted to be fed again. He said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (v27).

So then they asked what they must do. And Jesus answered them that they must believe in the One whom God sent. To which they replied by saying, “What sign are you going to give us so that we may see it and believe you?”

I imagine at this point that Jesus was getting pretty frustrated by their lack of comprehension. I mean, he had just given them the sign of the feeding of the 5,000 the day before. What more did they need to see a day later? Were they truly hungry? Or did they just want the exciting experience of a miracle again? Regardless of what they were seeking, they failed to see who was right before their eyes. Jesus tried to drive the point home by proclaiming, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whomever believes in me will never be thirsty” (v35).

But sadly, many in the crowd still did not comprehend, and at this point, like their ancestors in the desert did, they began to complain and grumble. Perhaps they truly desired more food, or more great signs, and all this talk about spiritual bread was not what they wanted to hear. Much like our society today, they wanted the entertainment factor and the instant gratification again and again. Nothing was ever enough. And Jesus essentially put his foot down and said no, that’s not why my Father sent me here. You’re chasing after the wrong things. Things that may fill you, but will never fulfill you. What you seek is temporary. What I offer is eternal. And there were many who turned away from him at this point.

Living in this day and time, we are privileged to know how the story plays out, and so it’s pretty easy to judge the crowd in this passage. How could they not have known that this was the Messiah right in front of them? How could they have

turned their backs on accepting the bread of life? But the truth is, their world was in turmoil. They didn't know how the story would end. They couldn't comprehend that this man in flesh and blood in front of them was THE Son of God. A change of heart was required, and they just weren't ready to make it. Until they would be able to recognize who Jesus really was, they could be fed bread and fish all day long, but there would always be a deep hunger inside of them that would never be satisfied.

In many ways, we're not that different today than the crowd was then. We may know who Jesus is and comprehend what he means by the bread of life, but on a day to day basis we still seek out the manna that comes and goes. We feed our desires. Society tell us we deserve whatever we want, and we eat that up. And yet it doesn't take long for us to realize that that kind of bread quickly becomes stale, providing no long-term, sustaining nourishment.

In this passage, Jesus states two requirements for us to never to be hungry or thirsty. He said to come to him and believe in him. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v35). But so often, in lieu of coming to Jesus, we go to all the wrong places. And instead of believing in him, we believe in all the other things in this world. And so we are left spiritually malnourished and broken. And our lives become fragmented.

I know my own life feels that way a lot. Just this week I felt pulled in a million different directions. How was I possibly going to get it all done? I would run from one thing to another, and at the end of the day once the kids were in bed, the emails were answered and the dishwasher was loaded, I would be so exhausted that I had

absolutely nothing left. And I would finally lie down in bed, only to remember all the things that I still needed to do. And I asked God, “Is this really what being a mother, a wife, a pastor, a friend and a homeowner amounts to? Is this all that’s left at the end of the day?!” I felt so fragmented. And frustrated. And fatigued.

And then I remembered what Jesus, the Bread of Life, told the disciples after the feeding of the five thousand. He said, “Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost” (v12). Friends, if there is anyone who can take these fragmented pieces of our lives and hold them together in meaningful ways, it’s our Lord Jesus Christ. He gathers up our leftover fragments and makes them into new creations.

In doing my research for this sermon, I searched Google to see if there were any articles on making something out of bread fragments. And I found one article entitled “Some Ways to Use Fragments.”¹ It was from the *Good Health* magazine dated April 1885. It was written 132 years ago by Mrs. E.E. Kellogg, and it said that not a crumb of good bread should ever be wasted. That there are few other articles of food that can be combined into more varied and palatable dishes than good bread. And then it went on to give recipes that used bread fragments to make cream toast, snowflake toast, apple dessert, fruit pudding and custard pudding.

I think it’s a pretty great analogy to imagine how God might use the fragments in our lives and turn them into something amazing and unexpected. The pieces that we want to throw out. The ones that feel so broken. The parts that fatigue us. The

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=D9Y1AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA125&lpg=PA125&dq=using+fragments+to+make+bread&source=bl&ots=vzCbzOG6ll&sig=PmwnPZULXdIAAiYzH4RSgJ74aU&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjw7-K4-73UAhWH3SYKHx6ZABAQ6AEILzAB#v=onepage&q=using%20fragments%20to%20make%20bread&f=false>

ones we might be ashamed of. The parts that feel lost. Jesus said to the crowd, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.” Christ promises to gather the pieces together and make us whole. (vv37b-39)

As you know, our church has made a conscious effort this past year to engage more in mental health issues within our community. If there is a group whose lives feel especially fragmented, it’s the mentally ill. But this week I saw evidence of Christ’s work towards wholeness, when our local missions team toured New Day Clubhouse. New Day is a local organization that provides a place for those with mental illnesses to be members of the clubhouse and to learn the value of commitment, responsibility, teamwork and social skills.² We had a wonderfully energetic tour guide named Brenda, who has been a member there for 12 years. She loves New Day and told us about how fragmented her life was before becoming a member there. At the time, she was not well enough to be home with her boys. She talked about how her eldest son had to step up and take on the head of the household role in her absence, and how hard that was for her to see. How sad she was not to be able to be there for her children. But when she became a New Day member, things began to change, and over time she was able to return home, happily reunited with her sons.

² <http://www.newdayclubhouse.com>

You see, the director told us that when a new member joins, that they tell them that many people outside the clubhouse doors have told them their entire lives what they *cannot* do. But at New Day, they're there show these members what they *can* do. They believe in them. They love them. And in the spirit of Christ, they are helping piece the fragments of their lives together to make them whole again.

Jesus will piece our lives together too. He will show us what we *can do* in Him. If you are tired of the fragmentation, if you are tired of the frustration and fatigue, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v35).

Jesus tells us to come to him, so I believe it's time for us to play that favorite game of hide and seek again, but this time seeking Christ. Did you notice in our passage how Jesus hid about as well as my 3-year old? No matter where he was, the crowd always easily found him. This tell us that Jesus is readily available, often calling out to us in order to help us find him. And as Jesus often does, he flips the script. For it was the crowd in our passage who relentlessly sought out Jesus, but it is Christ who relentlessly seeks out the lost, the broken, the fragmented, and offers each of us wholeness in the eternal Bread of Life.

All praise be to God the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.