

The Merits of Wonder Bread
Sermon on John 6:35, 41-51 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 13, 2006

I forget exactly when and where I was introduced to Wonder Bread®, but if you ask me, I'd have to guess that the introduction occurred at a barbecue joint. Since my mother preferred that we eat sandwiches made with whole wheat, discovering Wonder Bread was the culinary equivalent of reaching Nirvana. This soft, squishy staple of American schoolkids' diet that had long been denied me was a delight to behold. Wonder Bread® was fresh and tasty, pure and pasty. It was snow white with no holes. It could be molded into all kinds of shapes. And when I learned that Wonder Bread® was vitamin-enriched to help build strong bodies in twelve different ways, I was forced to wonder why this carbohydrate concoction had been kept from me. Clearly, my mother the degreed home economist did not fully appreciate the merits of Wonder Bread®.

My mother is not the only person in the history of the world who has failed to appreciate the merits of Wonder Bread®, however. When Jesus announced to the Galilean crowd—a crowd he had quite recently fed with loaves and fish—that he was the bread of life, they complained. They “began to complain about [Jesus] because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven’” (6:41). These Jews knew something about bread from heaven: Their ancestors the Israelites had received bread from heaven when they were refugees recently liberated from slavery in Egypt by God’s mighty act of deliverance. But never mind that. They had been wandering in the wilderness for days and had had nothing to eat. What good is freedom when you are hungry? So “the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. [They said,] ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread’” (Exod. 16:2-3).

In response to their need God announced that the very next day he was going to “rain bread from heaven” for his hungry people (Exod. 16:4). And the next morning, when the

Israelites woke up, they went out and discovered a layer of dew around the camp, dew that, when it dried, became a fine, flaky substance. But the Israelites took one look and asked, “What is it?” Moses told them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat” (Exod. 16:13-15). Indeed, this was manna, bread from heaven, the first wonder bread, poured out in abundance on God’s people so that everyone ate his fill and all were satisfied.

So as I was saying, the Jews knew something about bread from heaven, and as far as they were concerned, Jesus was not it. They knew Jesus. They knew his mom and dad. They knew where he had grown up and gone to school. They knew whom he had dated and where he hung out with his friends and his batting average in the synagogue softball league. This was just a man from Nazareth, and as Nathanael had asked at the outset of Jesus’ ministry, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46a). Many of them had been to Nazareth, and, like Arlington, no one would confuse it with heaven. “How, then,” the people asked, “can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” (6:42b).

How could Jesus of Nazareth possibly be the bread of life, the bread that comes from heaven? As Moody Smith says, “Jesus’ earthly origins are thought to explain him. He is a human being whose village and family are known.”¹ But knowing Jesus’ earthly parents and Galilean home and humble circumstances do not explain Jesus. Jesus is in fact from heaven. He is “the one who is from God.” It is Jesus alone who has seen the Father. (6:46, 47) And yet Jesus is not simply an angel or a heavenly being or a divine figure, but fully a human being. This is the “classical paradox of the claim of incarnation”: that a human being fully reveals God and is himself God.² It is only because Jesus shares a unique relationship with God that he can claim to

¹ D. Moody Smith, Jr., *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 155.

² *Ibid.*, 156.

be the bread of life. As Tom Wright says, it is “Only when people are humble enough to recognize God’s unique revelation in and to Jesus can they taste the bread from heaven.”³

Regrettably, the crowd fails to recognize that God is revealing himself in Jesus. Like their ancestors in the wilderness, the people took a look at Jesus and said, “What is it? You’re not bread, and especially not bread from heaven.” And before we go away shaking our heads and wondering why the Israelites never got it, perhaps we should pause to reflect. How often in our lives have we received what we so desperately needed like manna from heaven, only to say, “What is this? I don’t recognize this. This isn’t what I planned on”? What we need to sustain us doesn’t always come in easily recognizable, cheerfully colored plastic bags with a twist tie. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then you are going to go hungry a lot.”⁴

And so Jesus persists with the crowd and with us: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:48-51).

Compared with Jesus, the bread of life, the white bread of comfortable, upper-middle class existence, while fun to play with and easy to shape the way we want, is hardly satisfying. The white bread of savings plans and soccer practice and SUVs only makes us crave something more. What nourishment is to be found in the milled white grains of gated communities that pull out all the nutrients of living in neighborhoods that include people of every color and creed, only to have them artificially induced into the loaf as we try to build community or create spirituality?

³ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part One: Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 83.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Bread of Angels” in *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1997) 10.

Why do we look at carefully controlled religious experiences like worship, Sunday school, and Bible study and call them manna? As marvelous and miraculous as the manna from heaven was, it was still ordinary bread, and those who ate it died in the course of events.

“I am the living bread,” Jesus says, the bread that gives life because Jesus himself is the life (Jn. 14:6). “I am the bread of heaven,” Jesus says, because it is not what it is but who sent it that makes it heavenly bread. “I am the bread of life come down from heaven,” Jesus says, come down to nourish and feed us, to give us what we truly need. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, Jesus says, because eating of the bread of life means sharing in Jesus’ resurrection life, life now and in the age to come. The bread that Jesus gives for the life of the world is his flesh.

And so when we come to the Communion table, we come to eat of Jesus’ flesh, become for us the bread of life. Eating that bread changes us, because by that very act of eating, Jesus’ own life becomes a part of us. Perhaps Donald Miller in his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, says it best:

Sometimes when I go forward at church to take Communion, to take the bread and dip it in the wine, the thought of Jesus comes to me, the red of His blood or the smell of His humanity, and I eat the bread and I wonder at the mystery of what I am doing, that somehow I am one with Christ, that I get my very life from him, my spiritual life comes from His working inside me, being inside me.⁵

This is what it means for Jesus to be the bread that comes down from heaven, living bread, the bread of life: Our very life comes from him. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who can satisfy our deepest hunger: for love, for meaning and purpose, for belonging, for forgiveness. It is Jesus and Jesus alone “who provides not what we want, necessarily, but exactly what we need.”⁶ It is Jesus and Jesus alone who can satisfy our hunger because he offers us himself. Whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty. Those who eat

⁵ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003) 237.

⁶ Taylor, 11.

and drink the food that Jesus offers will have eternal life. Those are the merits of Jesus' wonder bread.