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First Sunday in Bread of Life Discourse

Jesus for President!
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Jesus for president! The people have eaten their fill. The feeding by Jesus exceeds even what the emperor can do, and now they want to make Jesus their king. They had seen how citizens of Rome would receive the dole of grain when the emperor wanted to mollify unrest. If it's free, they'll take it! And if the emperor wanted them to be distracted from their discontent with the political situation by entertaining them with the sports at the Circus Maximus, sure! They'll spend their fervor rooting for their gladiators rather than for freedom. Bread and circuses—they're willing to play the game.

But this Jesus—he might have to be their new emperor. Whereas Rome's emperor took grain from the taxes they paid and gave it back to them, Jesus took a little boy's small offering of fish and bread and multiplied it in front of them. Now that's a spectacle! This exceeds even the emperor's bread and circuses. Jesus for president!

When the emperor gave bread and circuses, the transaction was very clear: in return for free bread and circuses, the people gave their compliance, swallowing their yearning for freedom as they swallowed bread. They got the math. So, what does this Jesus want from them?

Strap in! We're taking a detour from the Gospel of Mark for 5 weeks in the Gospel of John. It will be 5 weeks of bread. (I want to thank Lou and Barbara for joining me in these weeks to lend their wisdom to their detour into the Gospel of John.) We will contemplate with the crowd for 5 weeks. It will take that long for Jesus to help the crowd understand the meaning of the sign of the multiplication of loaves

and fishes. Because the meaning is 180 degrees from the meaning of bread and circuses, the crowd will continuously misunderstand Jesus. In fact, they don't really get it, even after 5 weeks. But, the gospel is not written for them; it is written for us who are reading it—to explain to us what Jesus wants to give to us.

Today, we get a clue about what Jesus intends by a most crucial detail in the multiplication of loaves and fishes. It is easy to miss because we are enamored by the spectacle of multiplication. This is the detail: He fed them each with his own hand. Would the emperor do that? Would he look into their faces, call them each by name, and feed them like a parent feeds their child? This is the great misunderstanding of the crowd: they expected a transaction, but Jesus came for a relationship.

The crowd arrived on the scene like the Israelites in Exodus who had just escaped Egypt. Fed on the food of slavery, they could only understand their diet and sustenance from the point of view as slaves. What the crowd thought they were getting with Jesus is another powerful man who can give them the safety and security of endless bread. This was for them their basic need. This is how they saw themselves, as bread-needing people. And yet, Jesus did come to give them their basic need and this need was just as basic as bread: it was a relationship with God as intimate love. Jesus saw them as God-needing people and he came to give them not just the life given by bread, but abundant life given by intimate love with God.

In fact, to see themselves only as bread-needing people diminished their humanity, as slavery diminished their humanity. Jesus shows them in the act of feeding them himself, that to be human must include needing God. In fact, if this is excluded, then they objectify themselves and become easy pawns of the empire, selling their souls to slavery for bread and circuses. So, instead of seeing them as objects of his dole of bread or even of his good work and charity, Jesus was actually offering himself to them. This self was God in flesh and blood. Jesus comes near to give them love with his very hands. This is what the incarnation looks like in the Gospel of John, God made flesh to come close to us.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus unveils this reality with “I AM” statements, “I AM” as the name of God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. Now, “I AM” is revealed in Jesus Christ. For example, when Jesus walks on water and tells his disciples, “I AM” (translated as “It is I,” in the NRSV), he is revealing to us readers that it is “I AM” who fed the people with his own hand. This God who might have been imagined as far off, is now in the very midst of the world God loves and is drawing the world toward God’s self, so that they might come into intimate, loving relationship with God.

“I AM” is the name of the God who freed them once and will now free their minds. We journey with the crowd in a process of having our perspectives rearranged. What are ways in which we relate to God transactionally? How do we know when this is happening? What does intimacy with God mean and what does it require? Is our relationship to God a need as basic as bread, as water, as air, as money? Let us ponder together these five weeks how to eat the bread of intimacy with God.