



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Living Bread”

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The Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6:51-58

I live with Ed. At least that's what I call Ed. Ed's real name is Eating Disorder. Ed and I have been companions for over 35 years now - most of my life. Ed came to live with me when I was just eight years old. My family's house had just burned down. In the middle of the night fire raged downstairs while my family and I slept upstairs. By God's grace and my parents' prayers and bravery we all got out alive, except for our dog Ginger who was trapped on the main floor.

Until our new house was constructed, my family and I lived in the trailer, as we called it - a mobile home my parents bought and put on our apple farm. The day we began living in the trailer, was the day Ed began living with me. In the midst of the stress of trauma, unexpected change, and feeling displaced Ed promised me comfort.

Over the years I've learned how crazy and powerful my eating disorder, Ed, can be. At times Ed promised me that if I just ate and ate and ate till my belly ached and then ate some more, if I just let the food numb me, I wouldn't have to feel hard feelings or face hard decisions. But other times Ed told me to stop eating - to restrict the food I ate and let my body diminish and diminish some more because then my problems, fears and loneliness would diminish too.

I believed everything Ed ever promised even though everything Ed suggested never worked. No amount or kind of food Ed offered ever lasted. No matter how much food I ate or refused to eat, life was still hard sometimes. Life still came with fear, pain and loneliness.

Our lesson today is from John's Gospel - a gospel written for a people who needed to be reminded of what works and of what lasts. The intended audience was early Jewish Christians living in the first century - a people living with fear, pain and loneliness. The center of their worship, the Temple in Jerusalem, had been destroyed some years earlier. They were a displaced people. And as Jews who followed Jesus, believing he was the Messiah sent from God, they were displaced even more as fellow Jews banished them from the synagogues and friends and family shunned them from their homes. Considered heretics, they suffered persecution from all sides.

John's gospel was written for an anxious people who needed to be reminded not to turn back to old ways in their distress, not to put their belief in things of old - in the bread of the world that cannot sustain, the manna their ancestors ate in the desert and still died. And these anxious Jewish Christians also needed to be reminded to not search for comfort in the miracles of Jesus alone. The miracle bread and fish that Jesus fed the 5000 with was still just food - food that does not last, food that cannot give true life. Miracle manna, miracle loaves and fishes - believing in that dead bread is a dead end. It does

not sustain, it does not work, it does not last. John's gospel reminds those early Christians living in chaos and strife to look beyond the miracle manna, loaves and fishes for their comfort to the Miracle Worker, Jesus the Christ, who alone offers a feast that lasts, who alone offers Living Bread.

What are we feasting on today? What kinds of dead things do we consume as we look for the life we want? In your trauma, grief, loneliness, when you face unexpected change, where have you turned? Dr. Gerald May in his book *Addiction and Grace* says, "To be alive is to be addicted." Just as we are prone to fear, anxiety and loneliness, we are prone to the addictions, obsessions, compulsions that promise to help us cope. When the unexpected and unwanted in life happens, addictions, obsessions and compulsions start knocking on our doors, promising us comfort in that drink, that food, that drug, that activity. They promise us intimacy in another person's spouse, in sex, in pornography. They promise an escape from painful feelings through a spending spree, through surfing the internet, through workaholicism. They promise us a sense of control by encouraging us to control others. Our addictions, obsessions and compulsions promise us a feast that will give us the life we want, a feast that works, a feast that lasts. But their promises are empty. The feast they offer cannot give life. Their bread is dead.

Jesus says, "I am the Living Bread. Whoever eats my flesh will have life – for ever." When those early Christians hear these words, they remember the cross, they remember that Jesus gave his very flesh and blood for them, they remember that Jesus died for the whole world. When the first hearers of John's gospel hear Jesus' words, "I am sent by the Living God," they remember that as they believe in Jesus, as they align their lives with him, as they follow him, as they feast on him, they become a part of him and therefore with the one true living God above. When they hear Jesus' words, "Feast on me and abide in me as I abide in you," they remember that in the midst of the fear, pain and loneliness of persecution they are never alone.

Author Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, tells of her life as a raging alcoholic and drug addict. Addictions, obsessions and compulsions had knocked on her door with the usual promise of escape from life's troubles and traumas. All she had to do was let them in, abide with them, feast on their bread.

At maybe the lowest point in her life she was single, pregnant, and not wanting to be pregnant. She coped in her usual way - by smoking dope and getting drunk. She planned to have an abortion; but a week later she began to hemorrhage. That night at home she became aware of someone in the corner of her room. She even turned on the light to see if someone was really there but she saw no one. The presence in the corner remained with her and later that night she knew beyond a doubt that it was Jesus.

She felt appalled. No one in her circle of family and friends was a Christian. What was Jesus doing hanging out in the corner of her room? Anne had been going to a church in her neighborhood, drawn there by the music. She often didn't get past the doorway, but from there she could hear the music. She went back to that church the following Sunday. And of the music and the singing she heard, she writes "I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me." When Anne returned home from church she walked over to Jesus still there in the corner of her room and said, "I quit. All right. You can come in."

That day Anne Lamott began abiding with Jesus who so longed to abide with her. Before she let Jesus in, she feasted on her addictions - on drugs and alcohol, on dead bread. The day she let Jesus in she began feasting on him - the Bread of Heaven, the Cup of Salvation - and she began truly living.

For many of the years I have lived with Ed, I believed the answers to my problems could be found in the feast Ed offered - by abusing food and abusing my body. But five years ago, I hit bottom. I was tired – tired of trying to control my eating and tired of the shame and self-hatred I experienced after every food binge, which by that point was an almost daily occurrence. I knew I was powerless over this disease and I finally became willing to ask for help. In my middle year of seminary, in a prayer group of women I hardly knew, I confessed the food addiction and obsession that gripped my life and I asked for prayer. Immediately afterward a woman walked over to me and said, “We need to talk.” And we did. She told me her own story of living with Ed, her own life of addiction. I listened in awe because her story was my story. I was not alone any more. She took me to a meeting for those living with Ed – Overeaters Anonymous – a 12 Step program of recovery that had at its center my Living God. That was the day I began believing more in the Living Bread that Jesus offers, than in the dead bread that Ed offered. That was the day I began abiding with the Living Lord Jesus in a whole new way, little by little, step by step, one day at a time.

John’s Gospel reminds those early Christians to not forget where true Life is found. The Gospel reminds us that though we will face troubles in this world, to not look for relief in the food of this world – the miracle manna, loaves and fishes – because it does not work, it does not last. It is Christ alone who offers food and drink that lasts. He’s there in the corners of our rooms, longing to abide with us as we abide with him. He’s here offering a feast of his flesh and blood for the life of the whole world. Will you let him in?

Friends, taste and see that the Lord is good. Feast on him, be nourished by him and then go and tell the world that Jesus Christ is Living Bread and Endless Love.

Two years ago, on my first day as a Lilly Resident Minister here at First Presbyterian Church, I walked into my office and found a gift basket from our wonderful Deacons. It was overflowing with useful things for my new apartment, everything from Ramen noodles to paper towels. This plastic container was in that basket. I have used this almost every day for the last two years. It is the item from that gift basket that I treasure the most.

When I accepted the call to church ministry, I knew that I would be entering the world of Pot Lucks. For someone recovering from an eating disorder, this was a scary prospect. A compulsive eater and a buffet is a dangerous combination. Many of you have seen me carry this plastic tub filled with “Jana friendly food”, as my family calls it – food that my body needs and likes in quantities measured out ahead of time, assuring me that I will not eat too much or too little, assuring me that by God’s grace, my old companion Ed will stay away for yet another day.

I will take this plastic tub with me to my next call, the next church, the next world of Pot Lucks. Only this time I’ll be feasting with Buckeyes instead of Wolverines and learning how to do Pot Lucks Cincinnati style. Every time I use this, I will remember you all - how you welcomed me into this church family, into your homes, to your dinner tables. I will remember how you loved me and how you let me love you as you shared your stories, your joys, your pains. Thank you for your grace and patience as you taught me. Thank you for being sojourners with me as together we learned more about the true Bread of Life that is Jesus Christ.

I will miss you. But the connection we share by abiding in Jesus Christ, as Christ abides in us, will always transcend time and distance and Big Ten rivalries.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.