

Jesus, the Bread of Life
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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What happened the morning after the feeding of the 5000? Have you ever thought about it? I imagine people waking up in the late morning from their self-induced sleep comas. A sensation not unlike our November ritual of overeating turkey and falling asleep to the sounds of football on the TV and a lively disagreement between a crazy uncle and that over zealous cousin. As the crowd begins to stir, they notice that Jesus and the disciples had gone across the lake. The disciples in a boat, and of course, Jesus just decided to walk across. The crowd begins pulling up their tents, rolling up their straw bed mats, and then their stomachs begin to grumble in the mid day sun. The midnight snackers must have eaten the 12 baskets of leftovers, so there is nothing left to eat. So they follow the Son of God across the lake, albeit less miraculously so. They arrive on the Capernaum side of the lake hungry for Feeding of the 5000 Part 2.

What they found on the other side of the lake was not Jesus the Multiplier, but Jesus the Bread of Life. Jesus is tugging the crowd forward with signs of a deeper reality, signs of the coming kingdom, but the crowd is not ready to be pulled into a new reality. In fact, they are asking to step back into the past. The crowd's intention becomes evident in verses 30-31 when they ask for manna from heaven just like their ancestors during the Exodus. They want Jesus to recreate a moment in their collective history for them to taste and see now. They want Jesus to channel his inner-Moses and recreate the Moses moment in the wilderness.

Do we ever try to recreate moments? Do we ever try to recapture a favorite moment? In the last couple of years, recreating childhood photos has been a craze that has swept the Internet and social media. Some of my favorites are when three children in a rocking chair become three adults in a rocking chair or two small children

adorably posing in a cooler becomes 2 adults sitting in a breaking cooler. Or the best, a proud papa holding his newborn son becomes a father grimacing under the weight of his full-grown, bearded son. In fact, this trend of recreating childhood is so popular that each Christmas all the kids in Katie's family receive Christmas pajamas. This is a time honored tradition that goes back to Katie's earliest years. You can imagine little children running around on Christmas morning with their matching pajamas. So cute. Now imagine a roomful of sleepy adults who happen to be wearing the same monogrammed plaid pajamas. Doesn't quite have the same magic, does it?

Why do we want to recreate these moments and seasons of life? They make us feel comfortable. We are drawn to moments that make us feel safe. Human nature likes to stay with what we know and changing that trajectory can be difficult. At our most basic level, our brains create neural pathways. So based on what we are taught, what we see, what we do day in day out, our brain forms ruts that direct us toward wanting to do what we know.¹ For the crowd with Jesus, the request for manna was a request for what they knew. They had seen and been taught that this was the way God worked in the world, and it would take a new idea to make them get out of that familiar rut and forge a new pathway.

What makes us change? What leads us from one way of envisioning the world to another? What opens our minds to the possibility of forming new pathways? Change may happen when someone new crosses your path, through a book you read, or through a cluster of experiences you have that make you think that God's movement in the world may look different than you were taught. In my first semester at seminary, I found myself at Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, TX. Why I chose to go to Calvary that first Sunday, I'm not sure. Curiosity? An openness to something new? A

¹ Rob Bell, "The Sheeeeet Factor," *The Robcas*, Podcast Audio, June 29, 2015, accessed on July 28, 2015, <http://robbell.podbean.com/>.

suggestion from a professor? Whatever the case, I found myself at a church with a female pastor in the pulpit. Today, I wouldn't think anything of this occurrence, but being raised a Southern Baptist in North Alabama, I had never seen or heard a woman preach. But there I was, led to this experience for whatever reason. As Julie Pennington-Russell preached, I was captivated. And until Julie left for FBC Decatur a few months later, I was there every Sunday. She has a way with words and a way with people that make it obvious that God had called her to do exactly what she was doing at Calvary. And as my experience began to shift my thinking, I had a choice to make. I was faced with a theological dissonance. On the one hand, I could maintain the beliefs of the denomination I grew up in. I could hold on to the way I had been taught God operated in the world. Or I could maintain an openness to the way I saw God moving at Calvary Baptist Church. I could begin to open myself to other voices that affirmed women in ministry. I could lay down my religion, the ways I had been taught to believe and go about life in the church, for the ways I saw God moving.

But this idea of growing and learning about God's movement isn't only my story, it's the human story. In fact, the Bible is full of people having experiences that change the way they think about God and his creation. In his podcast named none other than the Robcast, theologian Rob Bell discusses this idea of growing human consciousness through the story of Peter in Acts 10. By Acts 10, Peter has become one of the leaders in expanding the way of Jesus. And as he prepares for lunch one day, he falls into a trance. As he is hungry and entranced, a sheet full of all the animals he is forbidden to eat comes down. A voice says, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Peter responds "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." Did you catch that? Peter knows that it's the Lord talking to him, but he still sticks to his religious upbringing for it is not holy to eat that which is unclean. In an instant, God is asking Peter to set down the beliefs of his religion, his culture, and everyone he knows. These laws had been passed down from the time of the Exodus, when God had asked the Israelites to follow certain laws that would make them a distinctive people. So these

are helpful laws, but Peter is in a crisis where he has to choose between holding onto what he has been taught or opening himself to the movement of God in his midst. Peter's religious beliefs are getting in the way of what God is doing.²

Because we the reader know that this vision is about more than pulled pork sandwiches, don't we? In this vision, God is leading Peter into a new reality where the way of Jesus is both for Jew and Gentile. Peter follows the Spirit's leading to go to Cornelius, a Gentile. By verse 28, Peter says "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." At this, Peter, still nervous and apprehensive, by faith in God's movement, enters the house of Cornelius.

With my experience at Calvary Baptist Church, I was able to hear Julie preach. I was able to see her be a pastor. I was able to speak with others who also knew and experienced this truth as well. But Peter was on the forefront of bringing the good news to the Gentiles. What a leap of faith that must have been to trust God's movement even when it went against his upbringing! It seems to me that an element of faith is openness. To have faith in God is to continually be open to the ways God is working in the world and step into what God is doing, which leads us back to manna.

In the request for manna, the crowd is calling for Jesus to recreate a familiar neural pathway. But Jesus is pulling them along into a new reality, into new bread. In verse 32, Jesus says "very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." Do you see what Jesus is doing here? In the past, God "gave" you the bread, but now he shifts to present tense to signify something fresh. In fact, the verb "gives" is used in present participle, which maintains both present and ongoing action. John Petty suggests that verse 33 could

² Rob Bell.

be translated “The bread of God...is in a continuous process of giving life to the whole world.”³

As the crowd begins to open up saying “Lord, always give us this bread,” Jesus finally reveals “I am the bread of life.” The new reality is that he is the bread that continues to give life to the world. This bread points to the reality of the Kingdom of God where all can be fed. As Jesus is life for us, we are to show and be this life to others. It is through the bread of Jesus that we truly live and as followers of the ways of Jesus, we are called both to receive bread and be bread for others.

So as we look for God’s movement today, may we be open to seeing ways God is being the bread that continues to give life to the world. In fact, what if we use the bread of life image as the lens through which we see God’s movement? When face with choosing the familiar or a new path, what if we say which way continues to give life to all? Does who we are, what we do, give life in this place and in our context? Do the ways we choose to be in the world lift up the humanity and belovedness of all God’s children?

When we see hunger in New Orleans, we can be the bread of life through creating Food for Thought in partnership with a local school. When we see a huge 90-year-old building with more space than it can use, we can open that space to Community Partners who are being bread in our community. Where else is God urging us to go? And how rigid are the trenches he beckons us to stray from? When we are aware, when we are present, when we are listening, we can see the ways God is moving all around us. Sometimes this calls us to go against the grain of what we are taught, what our culture says, what the Church universal has done in the past, what is the comfortable neural pathway... but God is ever inviting us to see where Spirit is being bread to others. By faith, may we go there.

³ John Petty, “Pentecost 10: John 6:24-35,” *Progressive Involvement*, July 27, 2015, accessed on July 28, 2015, http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2015/07/pentecost-10-john-6-24-35.html.

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