

The Bread of Heaven
 “Rabbi, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”
 Bob Shantz
 St. John’s West Toronto, August 22, 2021

In my last sermon on Pentecost Sunday, I began with a reflection on squirrels. How they infuriate me as they dig up my garden. But I also reflected on how they inspire me in their instinctual efforts to live life to the full. And in so doing they are alive in the Spirit of God. Doing what God has created them to do. Jesus said look at the lilies that are living life to the full and in so doing are so beautiful – all without worrying or fretting; he could also have said look at the squirrels – or at any other part of creation. This morning his teaching example is bread. So this morning, instead of squirrels, I want to focus on bread. Sour dough, rye, white, brown, gluten free, bagels, scones, baguettes, communion wafers (although as the worshipper said, “I can believe this wafer is the body of Christ, I just cannot believe it is bread!”)

As I did for squirrels, I looked bread up on Wikipedia: “The world's oldest evidence of bread-making has been found in a 14,500-year-old [Natufian](#) site in Jordan's northeastern desert. (Not far from Galilee where Jesus lived.) Bread is the [staple food](#) of the [Middle East](#), [Central Asia](#), [North Africa](#), [Europe](#), and in European-derived cultures such as those in the [Americas](#), [Australia](#), and [Southern Africa](#). This is in contrast to parts of South and East Asia, where [rice](#) or [noodles](#) are the staple.” (If Jesus had lived there he would have use rice to teach with.)

In many [cultures](#), bread is a [metaphor](#) for basic necessities and living conditions in general. For example, a “bread-winner” is a household's main economic contributor and has little to do with actual bread-provision. This is also seen in the phrase “putting bread on the table”. The Roman poet [Juvenal](#) satirized superficial politicians and the public as caring only for “*panem et circenses*” ([bread and circuses](#)).^[61] In [Russia](#) in 1917, the Bolsheviks promised “peace, land, and bread.”^{[62][63]} The term “[breadbasket](#)” denotes an agriculturally productive region. In parts of [Northern](#), [Central](#), [Southern](#) and [Eastern](#) Europe [bread and salt](#) is offered as a welcome to guests.^[64] In [India](#), life's basic necessities are often referred to as “roti, kapra aur makan” (bread, cloth, and house). The expression “to break bread with someone” means “to share a meal with someone”.

Thus for Jesus, bread was central to his diet, his nourishment. He takes a critical but mundane item of his daily life – like lilies or even squirrels – to help his listeners go deeper in their understanding of spiritual truth. He says look to the lilies – they neither fret nor worry and still are as beautiful as God meant them to be. Go thou and do likewise. In that spirit I said look to the squirrels as they leap from branch to

branch, build nests, give birth to more squirrels and dig up my garden – look at how alive, full of life they are – alive as God meant them to be. Go thou and do likewise.

Jesus does not mince words. He outrageously says, “I am the bread that has come down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread of heaven will never die.” The bread of heaven is better for you than whole wheat or gluten free bread. But like the earthly bread in our part of the world, the bread of heaven is central to our diet – to our healthy living. To living as God desires us to live, indeed how God has designed us to live.

What then is the bread of heaven? How do we include it in our diet? We know we need it. We strongly identify with Peter’s response – one of the most poignant in all of scripture – his response when Jesus asked him if he too would leave with the others who found Jesus words to be outrageous, Peter replied, “Where shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Like Peter, we know we need the bread of heaven – we know we need to be fed, guided by, inspired by, at times admonished be this bread. We know that our actions and words that have been nourished and guided by the bread of heaven will never die. They will live on in those who have been touched by them.

How did Jesus, the bread of heaven, spiritually nourish and guide his community? Through his actions and his words. His actions: by resisting temptation in the desert, by chasing moneylenders from the temple, by not compromising his message when on trial before Pilate, by being a man of integrity and compassion. And by His words: by preaching the eternal truths of the sermon on the mount, by giving insightful counsel to the woman at the well, by asking the right questions at the right time as he did with Peter this morning.

Actions and words – central aspects of the bread of heaven. Can we be bakers of the bread of heaven? In our baptismal vows we said we would strive to live as Christ lived – living as the bread of heaven with our actions and words. It takes great faith to live this way – courage, integrity, self-sacrifice, gratitude (which is ultimately the awareness of the life-giving presence of the Spirit in our lives – just like the squirrels and the lilies). That is to follow the great commandment to love God out of, gratitude for the bread of heaven and to love your neighbour as yourself (as God loves you).

What other option do we have? Where would we go? The prophet Jeremiah says God writes the law of life, the bread of heaven, on our hearts. We know the truth of that because we have heard words of counsel, wisdom, guidance, the truth we needed to hear spoken to us – words spoken by parents, mentors, partners and spouses, by leaders, friends, children, even strangers. We have seen actions of justice, mercy, compassion, love enacted in our world as we strive to be an inclusive

community offering earthly bread and heavenly bread to our neighbours and each other and soon as we vote for a new government that we pray will go and do likewise.

Actions and words we ourselves have given and received as they have been written on our hearts. Like Peter we have seen, and have lived with, the bread of heaven. Nothing compares. Where would we go? Why would we go elsewhere? We have known the words of eternal life. We have been fed by the bread of heaven.

Thanks be to God.