

Just Bread
John 6: 35, 41-51

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 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.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

We’re all pretty excited about Charlie. He came to Jan Hus’ Urban Outreach Center about a year before I arrived, desperate from the word Hello: dependent on heroin, no more family ties, no place to live, nothing to eat. Charlie was a homeless outreach worker’s worst-case scenario until he met Tom and Ramzi. They took Charlie under their wings, making sure that he reestablished connections with his family in Ohio, entered into a rehab clinic, got set up on a medical plan and got some dentures – apparently, just like crystal meth, you also lose your teeth when you use heroin to the extent that Charlie was addicted. They guys even got Charlie hooked-up with a new cell phone through a public service initiative. Now, Charlie is stepping-down his methadone treatments, has an apartment in the Bronx and even has a job. Just as important as all of that, Charlie has some friends.

When you engage in Just Hospitality¹, to appropriate the language of the social justice theologian, Letty Russell, you do your best to connect with another human being as a friend. You blur the lines of privilege, share what resources are available to you and seek to support a guy like Charlie in loving mutuality. You do your best to “do unto another as you would have another do unto you,” if you will, imagining for a while what you would like best if you were in their shoes.

Through Just Hospitality, we strive to care for all people, especially brothers and sisters living in unjust systems of poverty, but also to any in positions of vulnerability or desperate need like Charlie: those who are chemically addicted and in search of an out; those who are mentally ill and in search of wholeness; those who are sick and suffering in need of healing; those who are poor in spirit and wishing for a small taste of something good; those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, or job, or peace or the

¹ Russell, Letty M., *Just Hospitality* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press. 2009).

use of their limbs; those who do can't get their minds around the grace of our Lord that is ours. There's a whole world of want waiting to be saved from pressures such as these. Through Just Hospitality, we hope to help. In spite of the best efforts of many, some of them still end up on the street.

Ena Malone, one of your ruling elders here at Fifth Avenue, informed the group at our Affordable Housing and Homelessness Sunday presentation last week that there are 58,000 students who report on their college financial aid applications that they're homeless. Prompted to delve into this a bit, I came across the National Center for Homeless Education's equally disturbing report that "the number of public school children in the U.S. that are homeless (is) more than 1.2 million—the highest ever on record."²

But along the way, I was reminded of a rather feel-good statistic that blew me away. Listen to this. As many as 93%³ - nearly every single person in America -affirms that there is a God. Isn't that astounding? *Nearly every person in America believes that there is a God!* Now let's hold this statistic in tension with persistent conversations about mainstream, Protestant church attendance and membership declines that we've been hearing about for over 50 years. Taken together, it suggests to me that while most folks will say that there is a God, a good percentage of those people must wonder from time to time, if not every day, "Does God care?"

Does God care? Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John that he came to life to show people that it is so. *He is the bread of life so that one may eat and live forever.* (By the way, if you'd go back a few verses from our gospel lesson of this morning, you would find that this is the message Jesus gave to the crowd the day after he fed the 5,000 in the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes.) Yes, just as Jesus fed 5,000 from 5 loaves of bread and 2 small fish in the hours before, he was intent upon giving those who followed him to the other side of Capernaum now not only manna like our ancestors ate in the wilderness, but "food that endures to eternal life. (Jn 6:27 NRSV)"

And in the same way that Jesus stood before the Jews that day and proclaimed his oneness with God and the people of the earth, he stands among us today and proclaims solidarity with all the marginalized and oppressed, the aching and the hollow and lets us know that we are not alone. We are with a God who cares.

One of the most powerful ways we know that this is true is through the work of the church as the arms and legs of Christ in the world. That is where you come in for each other, for the community and for the world: to make present the caring of God today.

But the church has an uphill climb. We are climbing up against a secular culture that prioritizes playgrounds over housing. We are up against a secular culture that questions with its actions if not its words that all people should have a right to walk in certain neighborhoods, drive down certain streets, wear certain clothes and listen to certain music. We are *still* up against a secular culture that denigrates men and women, boys and girls, for their relationship preferences and resolve over who they will marry no matter what the Supreme Court rules.

A majority of the population in the United States doesn't wonder if there is a God. The majority of the population wonders if God cares. The church has an uphill climb in communicating that God *does* care because too often, we've yielded the way. Rather than lead the march for the rights of all people, the church often stumbles behind secular culture, subordinating the rights of whole segments of God's precious people out of convenient sidestepping of the good news. It becomes a morally artful dodge that enables the church to put off for tomorrow what's less convenient to address today. The church becomes a

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/06/a-high-school-for-the-homeless/395177/>

³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx>

cautious voice, a hesitant voice, a patient voice, a diplomatic voice, and ultimately a delinquent voice while injustices of all sorts are left un-confronted and suffering persists in clear and sometimes less visible ways. We're often *most* cautious, *most* hesitant, *most* deferential, and ultimately *most* delinquent in boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ as the bread of heaven that sustains all life into eternity.

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, my own Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and many like our two faith communities have demonstrated time and again that we're willing to go to great lengths to *show* people like Charlie that we care. But since at least the '60s, most mainstream, Protestant Christians like us have taken pains to avoid telling people *why* we care in order to insure that no one feel left out or put upon. Our desire to make known that we are rightly open and welcoming of all people has brought with it a downplaying of the name of Jesus Christ. We see this coming through in the work of the church, itself.

For example, when we go on mission trips or extend local hospitality with outreach guests for an evening meal, we circumvent language that would label as "Christian" any of our actions that help the suffering or ameliorate the plight of the less fortunate. I suppose this stems from a deeply rooted memory of the historical, Christian-missionary legacy of oppression and injustice: we don't want to make the recipient of our labor think that he's being proselytized or expected to convert in order to receive the benefits we are offering. The net result is that our Christian hospitality has become service work, as if we were there as members of the Rotary or Junior League.

Now, let's turn to even some of our general conversations with those who could use some good news. Have you noticed how we usually comfort one another without ever mentioning Jesus as the basis for our love and care? Actually, some of us who teach evangelism across our denomination *encourage* language that might be more universally accepted and less often rejected when we're talking with people who may not have a personal relationship with God. We encourage folks to say, "I'll pray for you" rather than ask a seemingly sad soul if he would like to pray with us, right then. Another sidestep? We easily use the more universally accepted name of God – I just did it - instead of use the sometimes-tension-raising name of Jesus. We never bring up scripture. We have it down to be justice-minded and inclusive. But it's as if we're unconsciously incapable or maybe we're *unwilling* to give credit to the bread of life who demands our Just Hospitality for all people. We do, and say what's necessary to be called Christian from the outside looking in, but we stop short of providing what is sufficient to actually have a lasting life.

You know, an unintended result of this fifty-year old, now deeply entrenched habit is that we've allowed the radical Christian right to appropriate the language of the church, thereby allowing the spoken agenda of the Christian right to be understood *as* Christianity.

Could it be that mainstream, Protestants have become *apologetically Christian*? If so, could it also be that an unanticipated consequence of what seems to be our implicit apology is that the world has begun to believe - in spite of all of our good works as the church of Jesus Christ, that while yes, there is a God, does God really care?

I am in no way proposing that we become an intolerant body of believers. Intolerant, radical, religious extremism has gained a corner on the market; that, we do not have to fuel. However, it seems that when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – even if quietly in the privacy of our own walks with God – we have a responsibility to our own faith; to consistently and openly acknowledge the authority of Jesus Christ over our lives and our life work in his name – graciously and respectfully, of course. If we *do* really wish to live in Just Hospitality - be in friendship at the margins⁴ with all those who

⁴ Heurtz, Christopher L. and Christine D. Pohl. *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

need friendship most, we won't hide our Christianity any more than we would hope that our new friends hide who they are.

We then might determine that real justice is served not when the beautiful loaves of bread are sliced and laid on each table for supper, but when we openly proclaim the authority of Jesus Christ who is the true bread of eternal life and the cup of everlasting salvation for all people.

And so I suggest that it is of the highest importance that even progressive, mainstream Protestants Christians affect a turning point in our practice of faith. Claiming Jesus' words to the crowd on the shores of Capernaum that day, we must receive the good news of Jesus Christ as the bread of eternal life. What's more, we must definitively claim our role as conduits for proclaiming the good news – not as a rejection of what other people believe, but out of conviction for what we know to be true and life-saving news. Let us not serve bread alone. While we extend just hospitality with those most in need, let us feel comfortable in explaining that we are serving as Christ first served. When we are teaching one another in all that is good, let us end with a note of hope, remembering that it is God who is at the base of goodness and that the good news is the final point of all of our education. When we are exploring how we can respond to people in emotional or spiritual or personal want, let us feel emboldened by the gospel to tell our friends and neighbors the promise of Christ that carries us through our pain.

There are too many people in this world who are crippled by the bonds of injustice and oppression. Their backs are bent by the weight of the biases against them such that their eyes can only see how close they are to the ground rather than how high they might otherwise soar while the church has sat idly by.

A majority of the population in the United States doesn't wonder if there is a God. The majority of the population wonders if God cares. The church has an uphill climb as we continue to answer this question. We have an uphill climb because too often, we have yielded the way. Rather than proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ as the bread of life, we offer slices of bread that leave our stomachs aching for the stuff that holds us over long after the calories are burned. All of the bread in the world will leave us wanting when it's not accompanied by the good news of Jesus Christ that informs us that God cares when the trials are longest and the prospects seem most bleak.

As the hands and feet of Jesus Christ working in this world today, what are you willing to do or say to communicate that yes, God cares. Jesus healed on the Sabbath and lost his own life to communicate the importance of your life. What are you willing to do and say to let people like Charlie and all those others in desperate need know that God is there for them? May the bread of life inspire you to dream of a vision of eternal life for all people that is possible because of a God who cares. And may you use your time, talents and energy well to proclaim this to everyone you meet.

Thanks be to God. Amen.