

1 Today we continue our worship series focusing on seven special names that Jesus gave to himself in the Gospel of John, with each name prefaced by the simple statement, “I am,” a not-so subtle reminder that Jesus is God. Each of these names is an invitation to discover more of who Jesus is by walking closely with him in a love relationship each day.

2 We’re continuing our series today with another familiar name for Jesus: The Bread of Life. Many of my favorite memories from childhood involve the kitchen where I spent the first 18 years of my life, sometimes preparing, but much more often being served, the meals that allowed me to grow into a healthy adult. I have one early memory, in particular, of sitting on the kitchen floor at the feet of my mother with a large aluminum pot with a handle on the top, manually mixing bread dough. Apparently, that was before the advent of the KitchenAid Mixer, and it was decades before the bread machine craze that swept our country! I can remember the smell of the dough, getting myself covered with flour, and how hard I worked to turn that crank. But I also remember the reward when the bread came out of the oven, served steaming hot and covered with butter and honey. When I hear the phrase, “The Bread of Life,” those are some of the senses that get activated in my mind. How about you?

Eating is one of those things that’s often dropped from books and movies, along with many other routine things that we do in the course of our everyday lives. The assumption is that eating is boring, it’s just one of those necessary things we all do to stay alive, generally three times a day. Eating has become so mundane for most of us that unless we have a particularly remarkable meal, we might be hard pressed to remember what we had for lunch even a day or two ago. But the Bible includes a surprisingly large number of stories relating to food, from Genesis all the way to Revelation. Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life in the Gospel of John, chapter 6, a chapter that’s been called by one commentator, “The Food Chapter.”¹ Why? Because it starts and ends with protracted conversations about food! We heard earlier a reading about the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. That miracle sets the context for our next encounter between Jesus and the

¹ <http://www.jesusplusnothing.com/studies/online/IAMtheBreadofLife.htm>

crowds the very next day. I'm picking up the story in verse 30 in the New Living Translation.

{Read John 6:30-40 (NLT)}.

3 How far we've come from picnic meals of bread and fish! While those were staple foods for the people of ancient Palestine, today's equivalent might look more like this. I'm pretty sure my two children, now adults, must have consumed their own weight in macaroni and cheese many times over in the course of their childhood. So perhaps Jesus, if he had been born today, might have said, "I am the mac and cheese of life." Why would Jesus pick a basic food item like bread to compare himself too, when surely even 2,000 years ago there must have been more glorified, valuable, or exotic foods? In fact, there were exotic foods back then, like flamingo tongues and stuffed dormice. Emperor Nero even made snow cones by having snow carried down from mountains and drizzling fruit juice over the snow.² And yet, Jesus didn't say to the crowds, "I am the flamingo tongue of life," or "I am the snow cone of Life."

By now you've probably spotted a pattern in these "I am" statements of Jesus. Just as his use of the phrase "I am" makes clear his identity as God, his association with common things (gates, shepherds, bread) makes clear his identity as human. Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and every time we read one of these "I am" statements, we're to be reminded of both.

To say that Jesus had a hard job would be a monumental understatement. On the one hand, he needed to be as concrete and simple as possible, so that both his words and his actions conveyed the Good News that God intended. On the other hand, every time he offered up miracles and concrete analogies, someone in the crowd inevitably mistook him! That's exactly what happened in the aftermath of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish to demonstrate to the crowd that he had divine authority to teach and forgive. Just twenty-four hours later, the crowd is back for more bread, either oblivious or uncaring that Jesus didn't come to give them bread, but to be bread. Can you even begin to imagine how frustrating that must have been?

² <https://owlcation.com/humanities/10-Weird-and-Fascinating-Ancient-Roman-Foods>

4 The caption of this cartoon is, “Clean your plate, young man. There are starving children in America!” How many of you were told at some point in your childhood that you had to eat all the food on your plate because there were starving children in China or Africa or some other faraway place? Even as a child, that argument seemed to me a bit lacking. On the other hand, sometimes it helps in the understanding of something to consider it’s opposite. So let’s talk about the opposite of being filled with our daily bread. Let’s talk about what it means to be starving.

The human body can sustain life without oxygen for only a matter of minutes and without water for as long as a week. But people have survived for more than two months without food. Starvation begins to happen when there are fewer food calories coming in than there are calories being consumed by the body. The body has a complicated system for preserving itself by breaking down glycogen and converting fat, but this all comes at a cost. A starving person is prone to apathy, listlessness, and even a higher susceptibility to disease, until they eventually die, usually by “cardiac arrhythmia or a heart attack.”³

There’s a similar process of spiritual starvation that inevitably happens when there’s an imbalance between the amount of the Bread of Life consumed and the daily spiritual needs we have. It’s possible to live to be greater than 100 years old without praying once, reading a single page of the Bible, or walking into a church building. But this too comes at a cost. We are more than bags of water and bones. We are spiritual beings, created to be in relationship with God. When we fail to eat our recommended daily allowance of the Bread of Life, Jesus, we begin to feel disoriented, confusing our own desires and preferences with the example and will of Jesus. We begin to experience apathy to the needs of our neighbors. We become more susceptible to the spiritual diseases of sin, until eventually our heart becomes so hard and dark that we die spiritually, oblivious to the voice of the Holy Spirit. That’s what spiritual starvation looks like. Thank God there’s an alternative for us!

5 I don’t think Jesus had the Communion table in mind primarily when he called himself the Bread of Life, but the Lord’s Table certainly does punctuate his teaching well. If Jesus came to be bread instead of giving us bread, nowhere else is that made more clear than

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starvation>

in the breaking of the bread in the Eucharist, when we remember and relive the breaking of Christ's body so that we might live as forgiven people. When we eat the communion bread, we're also commissioned, sent by Jesus, into the world to offer our own lives as broken bread for others. And so ultimately, Jesus, the Bread of Life, was broken for us, so that we might be broken for others, offering them eternal life in the name of Jesus. In just a little while you'll be invited to communion with Jesus, the Bread of Life. When you do so, receive God's forgiveness with glad hearts, but don't forget about God's commission to you as well. We are all sent, and the Bread of Life is our strength and joy for the journey.

6 Here's another saying I've heard since I was a child: You are what you eat. I want you to watch a fifteen-second video clip now. It's going to go by very quickly, so please pay close attention. {Play video, You Are What You Eat, 0:15}.

You are what you eat. As far as the Bread of Life goes, that's definitely true. We can feed on the Bread of Life and grow into the image of Christ, or feed on and grow into the image of just about anything or anyone else. What are you eating these days that's feeding your spiritual identity as a child of God, sent by Jesus into the world with Good News? Are you sitting on the couch and binging on spiritual junk food, sweet to the taste but bad for the waistline? Are you on a spiritual starvation diet, depriving your soul of the one thing you need to bring life and light into your heart? Or are you feasting on the Bread of Life, Jesus, in your prayer life, in the ways you love your neighbors, in your reading and wrestling with God's Word, in your listening and looking for the movement of the Holy Spirit, and in your gathering with sisters and brothers in the faith, to build each other up in the faith?

In God's economy, there are no food stamps or shortages when it comes to the Bread of Life. There's an abundant supply, given at great cost, but also given in great love. Aren't you hungry for something more satisfying than the empty calories the world has to offer? Won't you accept the gift of life, freely given for you? Receiving Jesus isn't a once and done thing. Just as we have to fill our stomachs each day, each day we also need to fill our hearts with Jesus. Please pray with me.

*Holy Jesus, Bread of Life, stir our hearts and increase our appetite for you. We freely and joyfully let go of the things that stand between us and you. Come and fill us we pray.
Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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