

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
I Am the Bread of Life
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 55:1-5; John 6:25-40

What I have in my hands this morning is a nesting doll. Nesting dolls are a traditional Russian craft. They are called nesting dolls because inside each doll is another doll, nesting and waiting to be taken out. The dolls are hand painted and can be of anything or anyone. When Cindy and I were in Russia the last time, we even found a nesting doll with San Antonio Spurs players painted on them and, of course, had to buy it for our son who is a life-long Spurs fan. Usually though the dolls all look alike and are displayed, side by side, out of the nest. This doll was a gift from one of Cindy's teachers, probably given to Cindy thirty years ago. The question that you may be asking then is, why am I holding this nesting doll here this morning? The answer is that it seemed to me to be the easiest way to help us understand what is in this morning's passage from the Gospel of John. I say this because the passage is filled with Biblical allusions and metaphors. And the only way for us to get at the heart of what Jesus meant when he called himself the Bread of Life, is to unpack the story one layer, or one doll at a time. So, let's begin.

The largest doll, or the container if you will, for our story this morning is the Exodus. I say this because all the Biblical allusions in this conversation between Jesus and the crowd point to the Exodus story from the Jewish scriptures. For those of you not completely familiar with the Exodus, it is the story of God freeing the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. It includes such stories as Moses and the burning bush; the plagues; the parting of the Red Sea; and importantly for this morning, the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with bread or manna. Recall that Jesus has just fed the five-thousand and now the people say to Jesus, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" What Jesus does then is tell a new exodus story; a new exodus story that frees people not from political captivity, but instead frees them from captivity to sin and death and leads them into life now and life eternal. Jesus wants those around him to think in Exodus imagery, but in a new and different way. So, we begin with a spiritual Exodus.

The second doll represents those who will be invited to go on this new Exodus. Again, going back to the original Exodus, God invited just the Hebrew people to be set free from their slavery, even though, as the end of the book of Genesis teaches us, all Egyptians were slaves to Pharaoh. God's invitation to freedom was only for the Hebrew people, not because they were somehow better than everyone else, but because God had a task for them to accomplish. That task was to be a light to the world and to one day offer liberation to all creation. With that in mind, the question for this new liberation is, who will be invited this time? The answer in the Gospel of John is everyone. Jesus tells the people that he will not lose any of those whom God has given him, and God has given him the whole world. We know this because in John 3:16 we are told that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that all who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life." God's love is not for one nation, one race, one gender, one sexual orientation, but for the whole world. So, we have an invitation for all to come along on this new exodus adventure.

The third doll represents what people must do to join in this new Exodus march. Once again, let's return to the Exodus story. When God prepared to liberate the people, the people had to agree to go. I realize that sounds like a "Captain Obvious" kind of statement, but the reality of human beings is that we often choose to remain where we are even when things are not well, even when things are dangerous and painful. Human beings often choose to stay put. And in fact, once the Israelites were in the wilderness, they said on more than one occasion, "We should have stayed home. At least there we had food to eat." In other words, the people not only had to choose to go with Moses, but they actually had to get up and move. The same is true for those who have been invited to go on this new Exodus journey. If people want to be set free, they must follow Jesus. This is what Jesus means when he says, "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and **believe** in him may have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day." And here, **believe** does not simply mean intellectual assent. **Believe** means to walk in the way of Jesus. **Believe** means to follow Jesus into a life of sacrificial love and compassion for neighbor. I say this because in the letters of John, the writer says, "Whoever says I abide in Jesus, ought to walk as he walked." So, we learn that this Exodus calls on us to walk in the way of Jesus.

The final doll is about the bread of life. A significant part of the Exodus story is the "murmuring" or complaining of God's people once their journey began. They complained when Pharaoh trapped them against the Red Sea. They complained when they were thirsty. They complained when they were hungry. We might think that God would have grown tired of all the complaining, just as we parents sometimes do when it seems all our children do is complain. Yet God never becomes angry with them. Instead, God supplies them with water and food. The food comes in the form of manna, a bread life substance that appears each morning in the wilderness. In other words, God sustains them on their journey. The question for the people who have joined Jesus on this new exodus adventure is, who will sustain us in this new Exodus? The answer is, Jesus will sustain us, because he is the bread of life. Jesus says, "*Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" In other words, not only will Jesus lead people in this new Exodus from sin and death, into freedom and life, but he will sustain them along the way. This is what the bread of life is all about, being sustained by Jesus even in the most difficult of times.

The reality of life is that we are all on a journey. It doesn't matter how old or young we are. It doesn't matter what stage of life we occupy, we are all on a journey. We make choices every day about how we will live and what kind of person we will be. We make choices about how we will treat others and how we will bless, or not bless, the world around us. The gift we are given in the risen, reigning Christ is that we are offered the support we need to follow in the way of Jesus. We are offered the bread of life that will sustain us day in and day out, even in the most difficult and demanding of times. Jesus will sustain us in sorrow and joy. Jesus will sustain us in life and in death. My challenge for each of us this coming week then is to begin each morning with these words, "Jesus, feed me on this day, as I strive to follow in your way."