

“THE AROMA OF BREAD”

John 1:14

John 6: Selected Verses

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton
First United Presbyterian Church
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Down the street from the Presbyterian Church I grew up in and around the corner from the First National Bank where my dad worked when I was a kid, sat a large wholesale bakery that used to supply fresh bread to a number of the little grocery stores in town and around the county...back in the days before supermarkets and prepackaged bread arrived on the scene, of course. That was also back in the days when the local dairy still had a milk route, the local laundry still had a laundry route.

Now I know that it's hard for some of you to believe I'm old enough to actually REMEMBER such a time. But despite what you may think, my memories go back nearly 60 years now and, believe it or not, I CAN still remember when you could get your milk, your laundry and your bread all delivered to your home...AND when you could still get the doctor to make a house call when you were sick!

Well, anyway, whenever I would pedal by the bakery on my bike or ride by in the car with the windows rolled down, the smell of freshly baked bread coming from the bakery would make my mouth water. I can remember savoring the aroma with a great big deep breath that I would try to hold on to for as long as I could. And I can also remember how HUNGRY that aroma would make me. I may have just eaten and not be hungry at all...UNTIL I passed the bakery, that is. And then I was hungry all over again. Problem was, however, though they put out the best aroma in the world when the bread was baking, you couldn't buy bread there. It wasn't open to the public.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will NEVER be hungry....”

Sometimes when I hear those words, I can't help but think about the bakery down on Church Street. And I can't help but think that if that bakery HAD been open to the public, the traffic would have been backed up for MILES! Which is PRECISELY what happened when the Bread of Heaven came down and offered himself to the world. People came from MILES AROUND, lining up and hoping for some small crust of something good that might fall their way.

But then, after his death and resurrection, Jesus returned to heaven. In his absence, however, he made sure the world would not go hungry.

He left his recipe for life in the Scriptures. And he left his Spirit to blend those scriptures into the lives of his followers...just as a baker blends the ingredients into bread. From there, Jesus knew that the circumstance of his followers lives would knead the dough...and that their very lives themselves would be the ovens in which the bread of life would be baked. And he also knew that, in time, the aroma of freshly baked bread would once again fill the earth.

Now the difference between the *inscriptured* Word of God and the *incarnate* Word of God is the difference between the recipe and the bread. As essential as the recipe is, it is not a RECIPE that attracts most people. It is the SMELL OF FRESHLY BAKED BREAD that attracts people! In smelling that aroma, the soul instinctively salivates and is reminded of the hunger it has for the taste of bread. It is the SMELL that entices the soul to taste and the TASTE that entices it to eat. All too often, however, instead of giving out BREAD to those who are hungry, we in the church...we who call ourselves FOLLOWERS of him who was and IS the Bread of Life...give out only the RECIPE.

The recipe, of course, comes in all kinds of different forms -- from Bibles to bumper stickers. From self-help books to motivational cd's and dvd's. From sermons to smidgens of advice. And all of them come full of WORDS. GOOD WORDS, many of them. WELL-INTENTIONED WORDS, certainly. But words that have not been made FLESH. Words that have not DWELT AMONG US. Words that do not FEED people with the bread of life.

I wonder what would happen if one day all of the WORDS we Christians use just went away. What if one day the entire body of Christ...the Church...were struck dumb? Couldn't WRITE a word. Couldn't SPEAK a word. Couldn't even move our lips to MOUTH a word. What then? What would be left?

Well, what would be left are our LIVES!

And what would our lives SAY? What would they say about who WE are and who our GOD is? What would our lives say about what we BELIEVE? If we were to take away the WORDS, how much of the gospel would still get preached? And how much would the world get fed with the Bread of Life if we only had our LIVES with which to feed people, rather than our WORDS?

"Preach the gospel," Saint Francis said, *"and when necessary, use words."* And he said that, I think, because he realized that the most important words we ever speak are those that are INCARNATE in our lives. Words that have been MADE FLESH AND DWELL AMONG US.

When asked why he wanted to go to Africa to work among the natives in the early part of the last century, the great Swiss doctor and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, said it was because he wanted his life to be his sermon. He wanted the days of his week to be a Sunday text so clear and so compelling that little else needed to be said. And as it turned out, little else needed be said. His life itself was heard by millions and he shared the Bread of Life.

There is a story of another missionary whose life was not heard by millions. He was an English missionary in India whose mission board required him to keep detailed financial records for which he had to be quite skilled at accounting...which he wasn't. He had no background in accounting or business. He only had a calling...to be a missionary and spread the Word of God. But his ledger books were always off, and the separate accounts he was supposed to keep were always getting co-mingled. And so the mission board fired him...told him he could no longer be a missionary. *Unfit for the mission field*, was their assessment, when in truth, he was only unfit for bookkeeping. And so he left without incident. And nobody ever knew where he went.

Years later, another missionary visited a remote jungle village to introduce the natives to Jesus. He told them of Jesus kindness and his love for the poor...how he went into the people's homes to eat with them and how he visited them when they were sick. He told them how Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, bound up the wounds of the brokenhearted and preached Good News to the poor. And how children loved to follow him.

The eyes of the natives lit up, their faces beamed, and one of them exclaimed: *"Oh Sahib! We know this Jesus well! He has been living here for years!"*

When they took the puzzled missionary to see him, it was the first missionary who years earlier had been dismissed by the mission board. He had settled there to do his work, far removed from the tyranny of double-entry bookkeeping. Whenever anyone was sick, he visited them and waited up all night outside their hut if necessary, checking on them and tending to their needs. When they were hurt, he nursed their wounds. For the old and the infirmed, he brought food and water. When cholera broke out in the village, he went from hut to hut, doing what he could to help. The Word made flesh and dwelling among them. The Bread of Life for the people of God.

I wonder. If someone were to come to our village...our neighborhood...our church...our homes...our place of work...and that person began to describe Jesus, would anybody hearing the description say, *"We know him well! He has been living here for years!"*

Well, that old downtown bakery in my hometown was eventually sold to one of those giant, prepackaged bread companies who market their rather bland, tasteless bread in colorful plastic bags with red and yellow and blue dots on it that shows up in all the major grocery store chains. And from that day on, the wonderful aroma of freshly baked bread could no longer be smelled in my little town...sad to say.

I wonder if that is a PARABLE of what can happen to the church...what IS happening to the church...when we get so caught up in everything the church is so often caught up in and forget what it is we are SUPPOSED to be about...which is allowing people to experience the wonderful aroma...and taste the unbelievably good taste that can ONLY come from the Bread of Life?

What was it that the prophet Isaiah said God wanted from us:

“What I want from you is this,” says the Lord.

Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice and let the oppressed go free.

Share your bread with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor.

Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear and do not refuse to help those who are in need.” Isaiah 58:6-7

That is how the Word of God dwelt among us, is it not? And it is how He dwells among us still. Except that now, it is OUR FLESH he slips into. What else could it mean for us to be called the BODY OF CHRIST if it is not His feet we are becoming...and His hands. If it is not going where His feet went and doing what His hands did...then what IS it?

Whose eyes will brim with compassion for the multitudes, if not ours?

Whose arms will embrace the prodigals, if not ours?

Whose hands will touch the modern day lepers, if not ours?

Any of you who have ever worked at Dinner @ the Prez evening meal program know the odd assortment of characters. who frequent that place. From the dirty, snotty-nosed little kids to the hobbled up near cripples who can barely make their way in the door. From the mother with far too many children...to the welfare recipients on the public dole... from the rarely-shaven, scruffy old men to the young punks who act like they are ready to take on the world....there are ALL KINDS of folks who come to Dinner @ the Prez – some because they really NEED it and others it really needs THEM. But they ALL come because they have one thing in common – they are HUNGRY for something in life...whether it is bread or friendship or companionship or so they can free up their money to do other things with...or because they are hungry for something they don't even KNOW they are hungry for...but God's know...GOD KNOWS!

There is one particular lady I remember we used to see all the time but I haven't seen for a long time now. I can't even remember her name, but she was an older woman with graying hair and sort of harsh features that told me her life hadn't been the easiest in the world. I remember she would always come early and sit and read the newspaper while she was waiting for the serving to begin. She always WALKED here and would always pull a little two wheeled cart in which she kept her belongings. And I remember she would always sit by herself and rarely would she ever talk with people around her. She had a heavy speech impediment that made her difficult to understand and I think she always felt self-conscious about it...so she mostly just stuck to herself. She was a sad sort of person that always seemed to tug at the strings of my heart.

But then one time when my daughter Annie was a lot younger and was here helping to serve dinner, I saw that woman in a new light. Maybe it was seeing that Annie serving that old woman...or maybe it was the rare smile I saw cross the old woman's face and the little chuckle that came out of her mouth. But suddenly it struck me that she, like Annie, had once been a little girl too. A little girl who went to school and looked forward to recess. A little girl who skipped rope and hopped her way through hopscotch. A young girl who played ring-around-the-rosie and maybe, when she was older, giggled with her friends over a schoolgirl crush. Surely she looked forward to her birthday and sparkly fireworks on the Fourth of July. Maybe she had a pet of some kind...a puppy maybe...or a kitten...something she cared for and that cared for her. At least, I hope she did. Certainly she hung up an empty stocking on Christmas Eve. Couldn't get to sleep for all the excitement tingling inside her. And dreamed through her dolls and dress-up clothes what her life might someday be like.

But her someday life had now become a shopping cart and a table by herself at a free-meal program. And there were no dolls to go back to...at least none that I could see...nor any dreams to look forward to. For even after eating her fill at Dinner @ the Prez...she was still hungry for the aroma and taste of something more satisfying than just what filled her belly.

My point in telling you this story is that the very least we should do is LOOK at those we encounter in life. If we turn our eyes away, our hearts will go with them. But if we look, maybe what we see there will in some way draw us into the picture. If we look with the right eyes, what we'll see will cause us to dig into our pockets of our humanity for something more than a little loose change. A sympathetic feeling, maybe. Or a heartfelt prayer. A kind word. A gentle touch. An understanding smile. Perhaps a listening ear. A hot meal, if only for a day. A shelter from the storm, if only for an evening. A taste of bread...the bread of life...the aroma of which comes from the very essence of OUR lives.

But WHY? WHY should we stop? WHY should we look? WHY should we take the time to enter into the picture of another person's life?

Because that is what JESUS did. And what he WOULD do if he were here. It is to PEOPLE that he came. And to PEOPLE that he wants to come AGAIN. But he is in HEAVEN. And if he is to come to people at all these days, it must be through US.

With PEOPLE, something is required of us. And it is up to US to listen and find out what that something IS. And it is up to US to RESPOND to that something with our LIVES. No, we can't do EVERYTHING. But we CAN do SOMETHING! And if it is done in Jesus' name, even if it's a very little thing, it is something beautiful...and aromatic...and delicious...like the smell and taste of fresh baked bread.

Vincent van Gogh, the great artist and painter, is quoted as having once said, *"The more I think it over, the more I feel that there is nothing more truly Christ-like than to love people."*

The more I think it over, so do I. For it is THEN that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us...once again full of grace and truth. And it is then...THEN that the wonderful aroma of bread...the Bread of Life...will once again fill the earth.

May God make it so! May God make it so...THROUGH US!

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