Karen Hollis – Sermon

John 6:24-35

August 5, 2018

As I said earlier, this is the 2nd of 5 readings on the bread of life, basically the entire chapter 6 of John’s gospel. There is a lot for us to unpack in these verses and each week will be fruitful in its own way.

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, amen.

Do you ever just need to have something explained to you? You’re trying to get it, one or 2 things are connecting, you’re trying to put the pieces together, but then you just have to put the brakes on and ask someone to explain. This happens to me all the time. I was at Vancouver School of Theology 2 weeks ago taking a class on preaching for growth and evangelism. You say the E word to a bunch of liberal protestants and you automatically have to explain yourself. Several times during the week someone spoke up, “you’re going to explain how to do that, right?” Ok good, as you were. As we’re trying to wrap our brains around a new context for preaching.

If you’re like me, sometimes you’ll be listening to someone and finding yourself working so hard to reconcile what you already know with what someone is telling you that you just have to ask them to stop . . . now just start from the beginning: how does this work? It happens to us with theology and spirituality. God, by definition is difficult for us to understand. God is the mystery beyond all mystery, the mighty Creator of heaven and earth . . . still God is as close as our very breath. God was close enough to feed our ancestors bread from heaven in the wilderness. God was close enough to hear them and provide something where there had been nothing.

When God provides manna in the wilderness, God makes it as much about obedience of the Israelites as feeding them. Now, it’s possible God fed them with migrating quail, and there are a couple of explanations for manna, including a crystalized substance that falls off tamarisk trees during the early summer. God tells them to eat everything they had gathered that day before the new day came. So the Israelites have to have faith that God will provide more the next day and not stockpile food. But of course they do stockpile food and it goes bad by morning. On the day before the Sabbath God tells them to gather 2 portions for that day and the Sabbath day – the Sabbath day portion doesn’t go bad. But still some of them go out on the Sabbath to gather manna, but there is none to be found. God really meets the Israelites where they are – refugees in the desert without food to sustain them – and re-established a relationship with them in that context. God has to explain to them how life is going to be in the desert and the adjustments they will need to make.

When Jesus feeds the crowd on the grassy hill, this is the story they remember. Just like their ancestors, they are looking for their most basic needs to be filled. Now they may indeed have recognized what Jesus did as a sign of God’s work, but they are operating on the level of feeding their physical hunger. I don’t believe their eyes were opened with the breaking of the bread.

At this point when the people find Jesus, he kind of calls their bluff and challenges them: it is time to go deeper in yourselves. They ask questions along the way; they are trying to understand, but they are not getting it. They don’t understand that while God doesn’t change, we do, which changes our needs and our relationship with God, only a little. We grow and evolve. God meets us where we are as a people and as individuals. If we are actively working, if we are retired, new parents, in prison, or in a personal crisis, God meets us where we are and in that place, has a unique relationship with us. The crowds of people are not where their ancestors were 1,400 before, and we are not where the crowds were 2,000 years ago. In each time and place God invites us into a unique relationship.

So standing with the crowd, Jesus kind of re-frames their encounter with him. You’re not being offered manna . . . manna isn’t what you need . . . rather God’s offering you true bread from heaven. Jesus says to them, “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." This is the line that resonated with me this week. (repeat line) Of course Jesus is talking about himself as the one who comes from heaven to bring life. He literally raises a couple of people from the dead; gives a life worth living to others in healing stories; offers life-giving teaching to everyone who has even heard the message of Jesus, as the stories travel across the countryside. If we think back through the stories of people who come to him in need, each one is a little different. Even though we can find these themes running through the stories, each story is one-of-a-kind, because each person is unique. Well, each one of us is unique as we find ourselves standing before Jesus in the crowd. What’s inside of us that we need God to feed? Which parts of you call out to Jesus for life? Or put more simply, what are you hungry for?

A couple of months ago my therapist gave me homework to write a letter of self-compassion to myself every day for a week. I ignored the assignment for a couple of weeks, but ultimately sat down with pencil and paper. At first the letter sounded contrived and spoke in a voice I didn’t believe and didn’t trust, but after several sentences and digging deeper, my words sounded authentic. I was so excited! I wanted to keep writing, but soon I had run out of new things to say. The next morning the first of 2 amazing things happened . . . now, I don’t hate mornings, I have just never gotten along with them well. I find the transition from sleep to doing my day a difficult one to manoeuvre each morning. But that morning I wanted to get out of bed so that I could sit down and write some more. I was astounded. I wrote letters of compassion to myself every day for at least a week, but it evolved into a kind of dialogue between me and different aspects of myself that need compassion. Then one day I was praying after doing some of this dialoguing on paper, when the second amazing thing happened. In the midst of the quiet, Jesus showed up. I don’t often seek out Jesus, but he shows himself to me in a mystical way now and then. This time it was as if to offer affirmation for the work I am doing, identify his hand in healing I’ve experienced, and perhaps a bit of bread for the journey. I do feel strangely fed by a visit from Jesus; affirmation is wonderful food for my heart. I didn’t realize I was so hungry for self-compassion and I didn’t realize Jesus would meet me there.

 Jesus tells the crowd, “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world . . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus is saying, believe in me and you will have no needs because you will have me . . . I am the bread of life.

This phrase should sound familiar to us . . . Jesus wants it to remind us of what God said to Moses out of the burning bush. “I am who I am,” the only name God identifies with God’s self. “I am who I am.” Jesus uses this phrase to introduce himself to people in John’s gospel. “I am the bread of life,” making a radical claim that he is God, come down from heaven to nourish life on earth. God once drew close in a burning bush, another time in a cloud that drew near to Moses and spoke of manna in the wilderness. Now God comes in human form to nourish the world and bring life. The mystery is now in human form . . . and this is where we will pick up next week.