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August 19, 2018

“Bread of Life 3: Soul Food”

I Kings 2:10-12 ; 3:3-14 John 6:51-58 Ephesians 5 :15-20

INTRODUCTION TO 1 KING 2:10-12

After David dies, Solomon, the second son of David and Bathsheba became the third king of Israel. In this morning’s passage Solomon talks with the Lord and is given an invitation to ask for anything he would like. Solomon is remembered for a number of things: his building program which included Jerusalem’s original magnificent Temple, his immense wealth generated through trade and administrative reorganization, his 700 wives and 300 concubines (and 1,000 mother-in-laws) but most of all he became known for his legendary wisdom, the result of the prayer that we will now read. Hear his choice and God’s response from I Kings 2:1-12.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 6:51-58

The text I am about to read is one of the most graphic texts in all the New Testament. In verse 66 of this chapter says that, “many who heard this said, “This is too hard a saying,” and quit following Jesus because of this saying.” Hear the word of the Lord from John 6:51-58

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, We thank you for daily bread and for eternal bread, for sending your Son to be the Bread of life for us. Lord, thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, and our hearts to receive and may we with our lives respond to this your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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The German theologian Helmut Thielicke told of a hungry man passing a store with a sign in the window, "We Sell Bread." He entered the store, put some money on the counter, and said, "I would like to buy some bread." The women behind the counter replied, "We don't sell bread." "The sign in the window says that you do," the hungry man said. The woman explained, "We make signs here like the one in the window that says 'We Sell Bread.'" But, as Thielicke concludes, a hungry man can't eat signs.

Life sometimes fools us too. Bread isn't always found where it seems to be. Today's Gospel lesson picks up where we left off last week in John 6. Like the crowds looking for something else or that man looking in the wrong store, we often miss the point when God offers us the Bread of Life in Jesus. 1

“When we say about someone “he used to eat, drink and sleep baseball,” we don’t mean that he actually ate a baseball or that he put a baseball in a blender and made a shake out of it and drank it or that he played baseball in his sleep like a sleepwalker. That’s one way of saying, “all that young man ever thought about was baseball.” (It’s looking like last year’s Champions need to wake up their bats)

Some scriptures are symbolic. It is not intended to be taken literally. The problem is that the writer seldom comes out and says, "This is symbolic, figurative, metaphorical, spiritual or maybe even humorous language"²

For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door." He didn't mean that if you hugged him you might get splinters." When he says "I am the Bread of Life" he wasn't making a joke referring to the fact that like leavened dough he would one day RISE. ☺

Today we take it for granted that we understand what Jesus meant when he said the bread was his flesh and the wine was his blood, but many of the Jews in the first century rejected that idea outright. Take Christ's flesh and blood into ourselves? They took it literally and not "literarily."

To take something literarily requires discernment. That's what Solomon asked for.

God came to Solomon in a dream and gave him a question that had an open-ended offer - "What would you like for me to give you?"

It reminds me of the little girl that said to her mommy, "Mommy, I'm fixin' to pray. Do you want anything?" (she was from Texas—she was "fixin' to pray")

Well, what would *you* have asked for? Wealth? Fame? Perfect health till the day you die at a ripe old age? A lifetime of happiness? Freedom from troubles? What Solomon asked for was "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil."

Yesterday on the NPR Radio program "This American Life," John Hodgman conducted an informal survey in which he asks numerous people if they could have one super power what would they want. He asked, "Which is better: the power of flight or the power of invisibility?" He found that how you answer tells a lot about what kind of person you are. And also, no matter which power people chose, they never envisioned using their gift to fight crime.

Now in talking about Solomon, we normally abbreviate his request to say simply that he asked for wisdom, and the expression "the wisdom of Solomon" has become a catch phrase in our culture. That's a fair way to shorthand Solomon's request, but it doesn't quite capture all that the original Hebrew of this passage conveys. What's been translated in English as "an understanding mind" is, in Hebrew, literally "a hearing heart," which implies not so much the cleverness of clear thought as the empathy of deeper understanding.

The other part of what Solomon asked for, rendered in English as the ability to "discern between good and evil," is in the literal Hebrew, the ability "to hear judgment." Putting this together, Solomon was asking for the ability to hear God's truth compassionately.

The single English word that probably comes the closest to the meaning here is not "wisdom" but "discernment." At its most basic level, discernment simply means recognizing differences, and note that part of what Solomon asked God for was the capacity "to discern *between* good and evil."

We could use a good dose of that today, to be able to discern between true news and fake news, between real posts and troll posts, between real facts and alternative facts.

According to this morning's passage from I Kings, discernment was a gift given by God to Solomon in an unusually large measure. Why should you and I talk about discernment today if it was a special gift given to Solomon back in the dark ages of the Old Testament? Here's why: Just because discernment was given to him in such quantity does not mean that the rest of us haven't been given any. In fact, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul speaks of the things that Christians can "spiritually discern" because the Holy Spirit gives them - us - that gift (1 Corinthians 2:14-15).

That's what Paul was advocating in our passage from Ephesians 5: don't be filled with wine but be filled with the Spirit. Don't rely on spirits (like getting drunk with wine), but on the Spirit, the Holy Spirit to be able to make right decisions.. Spirits can cloud one's mind, but the Holy Spirit can help us discern God's will and our path to follow God's direction.

Like any gift of the Spirit, discernment is given in different measures to different people, but most Christians have the gift to some degree. In short, discernment is the ability to make good judgments in our lives, our physical lives and our spiritual lives. So we should talk about discernment to help us recognize the gift that is within us and to consider what means God uses to help us listen, to help us exercise our hearing hearts.

It is important to distinguish at this point between spiritual discernment and the more general good judgment that many people possess or as we might call it, "common sense." Many people possess the judgment that enables them to perceive truth from falsehood or at least to suspect when something is not as it is presented to be.

Spiritual discernment, however, goes beyond that. It is the ability to tell the difference between, in some cases, good and evil, and in other cases, what is God's will and what is not. In either circumstance, however, it grows out of a hearing heart. Its purpose is to help us decide whether or not something is from God.

But, of course, we are talking about *spiritual* discernment, so we are thinking not primarily about counseling tools but as a way to listen to God and to others. The biggest difference between spiritual discernment and the more general ability to spot the truth is that spiritual discernment relies on consciously seeking God's direction. God may use our feelings as one way to communicate with us, but not the only way. God also uses our thinking processes.

One more means that God uses to help us discern his will is our prayer life. Remember that although God spoke to Solomon in a dream, they had a prayer-like conversation. God invited Solomon to speak to him, and that's exactly what Solomon did, using the language of prayer. Certainly that's one thing prayer is for - to lay out before God what we are considering and ask his help in our deciding what is his will.

In this morning's passage Jesus says some things that needed spiritual discernment to understand. They were words that even someone with the wisdom of Solomon would have had and may still have a hard time understanding.

He said, "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not have life within you." Those words are in the third verse of the song "I Am The Bread of Life," I intentionally skipped that third verse because without explanation I find those words hard to sing. If I said those words off someone on the street the response might be, "Why, that sounds cannibalistic!" If it sounds a bit offensive to you, possibly bordering on the obscene, don't feel alone. That is exactly what many who heard Jesus say it felt. Indeed, after Jesus said it many of his followers left him.

"You are what you eat." That's what some say to illustrate somewhat flippantly that what we take in our bodies has an effect on who we are. It means that what I take into my body has an effect on my body, has an effect on me. Meals are assimilated into our bloodstream and even into our bones. Since eating is the activity of life itself, it should not surprise us that Jesus describes Himself as the food of life." **3**

Jesus is saying, "If you need to take in physical food to live for now, then you going to need spiritual food to live forever. You're going to need Soul Food.

This week we lost a bright light in our human universe in the death of the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. People have been leaving tributes all week at her Detroit home. Luminaries and musicians will be honoring her memory. I posted a cartoon on my Facebook that shows Aretha giving and receiving a fist bump from St. Peter that had the caption R E S P E C T.

We could use some extra respect for each other these days in our daily diet of words. We could also use more people who have earned the respect Aretha cried out for and got when she sang.

Galatians 5:22-23 describes the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control.

On Friday at Georgia Thomas's memorial service I shared a poem that describes the other important part of a balanced spiritual diet, the vegetables of the soul. It's called,

A Garden For All Seasons

First, plant four rows of peas:

Peace, Pleasantness, Preparation, Perseverance

Next to these, plant three rows of squash:

Squash gossip, Squash griping, Squash criticism.

Next plant five rows of lettuce:

Let us obey rules. Let us be true to our obligations, Let us be faithful to duty.

Let us be loyal and unselfish. Let us love one another.

No garden is complete without turnips:

Turn up on time for meetings. Turn up with new ideas.

Turn up always with a smile. Turn up with determination to make everything count for something good and worthwhile.

Yes, we do not live by bread alone. We live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. In addition to the meat of the Word, the Bread of Life we need the fruit of the spirit, and the vegetables of the soul.

Now, we should have a healthy concern for our bodies. The "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19, RSV). But I wonder if this obsession with getting food into us, and then getting those unwanted pounds off of us, isn't perhaps symptomatic of something else.

Solomon knew the value of soul food. That's why he asked for wisdom and discernment. If he had those and used those the other things would take care of themselves.

The hunger that drives us to cookbooks and restaurants (and then, to diet clubs or health clubs), the emptiness we try to pack with possessions, the way we may try to fill ourselves up with more recognition, more titles, more awards, more experiences; could these not be our spiritual emptiness crying out for God?

Food is essential for our earthly life. When you get hungry, you either sit down for a meal or reach for a snack. Your stomach is quick to thank you when you do. But Soul food is essential for eternal life.

We love to celebrate with food and drink. It would be hard to imagine celebrating a wedding without a reception with ...food. We celebrate with food for graduation, for a promotion, for a retirement party, for a birthday. On Friday our Member Care Committee swung into action to provide a reception for the family of Georgia Thomas following her Memorial Service. Today after this service we are going to share a meal to celebrate the completion of our Capital Campaign. Next week we are going to share a meal to celebrate Beth Ehlig's 90th birthday.

But the apostle Paul said, the Kingdom of God is not meat nor drink, but righteousness, peace and joy." (Romans 14:17) Jesus said, 'My food is to do the will of my Father.'

We know that it is important to fill up our bodies with the proper kind of nourishment. And it will probably come as no surprise that the same can be said for our souls. We may have grocery stores called Whole Foods but what we really need are stores that offer Soul Foods....that have seven shelves high and forty-five feet long aisles of Bread of Life options..

We may not eat, drink and sleep baseball. But we can eat, drink and sleep and live the life our Lord calls us to live because we are not only sustained by bread from the earth, but our souls are sustained by the bread from Heaven. May we supplement our diet beyond Food that is Fast to include Food that will Last --that will last us long after we're gone from this earth -- Soul Food: The Eternal Bread of Life..

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we give you thanks for the household of faith. We give thanks for those who have lived before us as heirs of your goodness. They have passed on their vision to us. From them we receive examples of faithfulness as they responded to Jesus' teaching.

We pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one. Be with the family of Georgia Thomas. Surround them with your embracing compassion; care for them in their solitude, and comfort them during the lonely hours. May the spirit of the living Christ abide with them to encourage them, and may Christ's resurrection from the dead give them hope for life that lasts eternally.

Make us more conscious of those who yearn to hear your word, who seek direction for their lives. Let us be for them the clear call to commitment, a source of hope and meaning in the midst of change. Lead us together to a new respect for the mysteries of faith that defy easy comprehension and marginal discipline. Help us to follow in the footsteps of saints who dwell eternally at your throne of grace. May the course they charted direct our path and the lessons they learned remain a heritage that we can pass on to those who follow us.

Use us as instruments of your mercy, so that we sit with the lonely, show hospitality to the stranger and provide clothing for those who go without, and to feed the hungry with food for body and soul. Give to all your people the hope, confidence and dignity that come from being children of God.

1 The Bread of Life, by Michael J. Heggen

2. David E. Hall, The Bread of life

3 Charles R. Leary, Mission Ready! CSS Publishing Company

4 Brian Harner, Christ: Bread of Life

5 William E. Keeney, Preaching the Parables, CSS Publishing Company

Speaking of the need for wisdom and discernment this week school will start up again and in honor of those who are teachers, and those that will be their students and

administrators and staff and our GCCISD Superintendent I would like for us to sing a verse of a song I ran across this week. The tune is the tune of "I Sing the Mighty Power of God." Or "Hosanna Loud Hosanna."

Lord, we pray for teachers, staff administrators, bus drivers and students as they return to school after summer break. We pray that there will be an atmosphere of learning and for safety for all involved in that enterprise. Give the students a hunger for knowledge and a desire for the kind of wisdom for which Solomon asked.