Sunday, August 21, 1988
WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT COMMUNION? (No. 3 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
John 6:35,50-51

Not too long ago, on a Sunday morning following a worship service in which Holy Communion had been celebrated, a young girl, about five years old, came forward to look more closely at the materials of communion up front here on the Communion Table. She asked me if she could examine the bread. So I took one of the bread trays off the table and held it close down to her eye level so that she could see it. She studied it very carefully for a moment and then said, "Why, these are only little pieces of bread." In her own way, she had been pondering the question: "What's so special about Communion?" and she expected the answer to be found in the materials used.

When she said, "These are only little pieces of bread," she sounded disappointed, but she had it right. They were only little pieces of bread — the kind many people put on their tables every day, the kind we use for toast in the mornings or for sandwiches at lunch. All of us are as familiar with this kind of bread as was the little girl. There is white bread, whole wheat bread, cornbread, rye bread, oatmeal bread, banana bread, multigrain bread, and more.

What's so special about Communion? Maybe we expect too much. I remember the first time I took Communion. In the church where I grew up, young children were not allowed to take Communion until we were confirmed, and that was usually at about age 12 or 13. And that church, like some other congregations still today, did not use plain ordinary everyday bread, but little round, very thin white Communion wafers. They were made from flour and water and were tasteless, but to a 12 or 13-year-old, they seemed to be especially holy.

I don't know exactly what I expected to happen in that first Communion after we had been confirmed, but I was disappointed because it seemed to me personally that nothing out of the ordinary took place. I did not feel an unusual surge of power or energy; Jesus did not appear to me in a vision, and after the Communion service was over, I felt the same as I had felt before.

It was not until years later that I realized that one of the important meanings of Communion is that God is to be found precisely in the ordinary. God is present in everyday events and materials as well as in the extraordinary. This is not to deny the validity of unusual religious experiences. But it is to say that we can also experience God in the common, ordinary events of life as well.

What's so special about Communion? One answer is — there's nothing special at all. Jesus is to be found in the bread and wine of life — in everyday materials. In Jesus' time, much more than today, bread and wine were the common stuff of existence. They could be found on every table in every home. It's significant that Jesus chose not to use exotic foods or rarely eaten foods for us to remember him with.

I think Jesus also meant to remind us that his presence is to be found in the action of eating and drinking together as human beings. What could be more common? We all need to eat and drink to stay alive.

But there's more to the meaning of Communion than that.

After the resurrection, when the followers of Jesus would gather together each week and break the bread and drink from the cup, it was then they remembered that Jesus had told them, “I am the bread of life; those who come to me will never hunger, and those who believe in me will never thirst.” Notice that Jesus did not say that he was the dessert of life, but the bread.

“The bread of life"—it’s a revealing metaphor. In the same way that ordinary bread will satisfy physical hunger, Jesus, “the bread of life,” will satisfy spiritual hunger. He will fill our hunger for meaning and purpose in life.

This morning, let’s carry the metaphor a little further and ask, What are some of the ingredients of the ‘bread of life’ which Jesus offers us so that it satisfies our deepest hunger?

The basic ingredient of the “bread of life” is God’s love. This is what Jesus Christ reveals and brings to us more than anything else. Christ is the love of God made focused in a human being and living among us. Jesus said it this way: “I am the living bread come down from heaven.” Once a person knows and accepts that he or she is loved and accepted by God, a basic and deep hunger is satisfied. We all have the desire to be loved and accepted. Thus, when one experiences the love of God, then one also knows that he or she has worth, value, and dignity. When you know you are loved, life takes on new meaning.

The sad fact is that many people still believe they have to earn God’s love, and to prove their worth to themselves and others, they collect things, believing that the more they can surround themselves with, the more value they have.

If you have ever had to make out a financial statement, the bottom line usually is, “Your net worth.” But this net worth in financial assets has nothing at all to do with your personal value, your worth as a human being, or your value in God’s eyes.

Your real net worth is made up by the fact that you are loved and accepted by God. And that love does not, cannot be earned in any way — it is freely given. It’s the basic ingredient of the “bread of life.”

A second ingredient of the “bread of life” which Jesus offers to all of us is God’s forgiveness. A loved person is forgiven over and over again. If you love someone, then you are ready to forgive that person over and over again — and it is frequently “undeserved” forgiveness. Once a person has truly experienced forgiveness, then that individual becomes a forgiving person. A further benefit follows: once you are forgiven and you are forgiving of others, you become a truly free individual. You are no longer a slave to your hurts, to your resentments, to your grudges, to your guilt feelings.

Sure, you’ll still have these feelings and emotions, but they will no longer rule your life. You’ll be able to go beyond them, to let them go. Then a heavy burden is lifted.

A third ingredient of the “bread of life” is the power of God. I’m not talking here about some kind of magical and instant change which will come over you once you eat the bread of Communion. Rather, the bread of Communion reminds us that as the power and presence of God was in Jesus, so it is also present in each one of us. It’s been there all along, but we don’t always recognize it.
If the “bread of life” means anything, it means that God lives and dwells among us and within us. You are beloved of God. God is in you as the ocean is in the wave.

These then are the main ingredients of the “bread of life"—God’s love, God’s forgiveness, and God’s continued presence and power within you and within the creation.

What’s so special about Communion? The bread we eat this morning reminds us that Jesus is the “bread of life,” and this bread is as necessary if you are to live fully and abundantly as the everyday food which we eat. Amen.