Sunday, August 13, 2000
SOUL FOOD
John 6:35,41-42,48-51

“Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'” (John 6:35)

All of us are familiar with bread, ordinary, everyday bread. There is white bread, oatmeal bread, whole wheat bread, corn bread, rye bread, multi-grain bread, raisin-nut bread, and more. Today, more and more people are reading the labels on food to know the ingredients. People are scrambling to find the diet that is right for them.

Last week, when I was buying a loaf of bread and thinking about this sermon and the claim of Jesus that he is “the bread of life,” I decided to read again the list of ingredients printed on the label of several different kinds of bread. One list included the following: 100% stone-ground whole wheat flour,
unbleached enriched wheat flour (niacin, iron, thiamin, riboflavin),
honey, oatmeal, wheat gluten, vegetable shortening, soy flour, rye flour, flaked whole wheat, cornmeal, yeast, salt, diamalt.

Another list of ingredients on a different brand of whole wheat bread included: stone-ground wheat, 100% whole wheat flour, water,nonfat milk, unsulphured molasses, partially hydrogenated vegetable shortening, corn syrup, wheat gluten, yeast, salt, butter, calcium propionate to retard spoilage, honey, mono and diglycerides, lecithin.

Both of these labels also stated—"no artificial ingredients.” That sounded good to me. When I was growing up, our mother always baked the bread for the family. She never used any artificial ingredients. Seldom did she buy bread at the grocery store.

Bread is one food that is common to human beings everywhere, although there are many varieties. No matter how abundantly other food was offered, bread was the main food and essential to an Eastern meal, and that was true in the culture in which Jesus grew up. In that world, bread was sacred. People would take oaths by touching and kissing it. Bread was a sacred bond between friends and the sign of an intimate relationship. It was often said, “I have eaten his bread. I will die for him.” Enemies were reconciled by breaking bread together. Bread was also a bond of protection. When an individual took refuge in another’s house and had eaten his bread, the owner of that house was bound to defend his guest at any cost, even with his life.

So, when Jesus used the metaphor, “I am the bread of life,” people could identify with it immediately. It had a depth of meaning that is difficult for us to imagine. Notice that he did not say he was the meat of life, or vegetable of life, or fruit of life, or dessert of life, or the salad of life. It’s a revealing metaphor. Whether you were rich or poor, lived in the city or out in the country, you ate bread. If you at least had bread, you would not starve.

While ordinary bread will satisfy physical hunger, Jesus was implying that we also need “soul food” or “soul bread” to satisfy our spiritual hunger.

We can easily identify the ingredients of the bread we eat today simply by reading the label, as I illustrated earlier. But what are some of the main ingredients of the “bread of life,” the “soul food” which Jesus offers?

First, it needs to be noted that there are almost as many “soul food” diets today as there are other kinds. We live in a world of food fads, both physical and spiritual. People are scrambling to find a diet that is right for them, physically and spiritually. One diet I came across is called, “Body Type Diet and Lifetime Nutrition Plan.” It divides people into thyroids, adrenals, pituitaries, or gonads, recommending different foods for each one.

There’s also a raw foods diet that allows only uncooked food, the caveman diet which pushes only what they supposedly ate, and The Body Code diet which divides dieters into warriors, nurturers, communicators, and visionaries.

There are also diet books and techniques which combine regular food and spiritual food. I have several shelves filled with books on this subject which I’ve been collecting over the years. Here’s one title: “Diet Away Your Stress, Tension, and Anxiety.” I can imagine someone will one day write a book with the title, “Diet Your Way to God.”

And there are all kinds of books dealing with soul food on my shelves. A few examples: “Healing with Mind Power,” “Stop! You’re Driving Me Crazy, How to Keep the People in Your Life from Driving You Up the Wall,” “You’re Number One,” “Body-Mind: A Breakthrough Approach to Increased Self-Awareness for a Happier, Healthier Life.”

We seek in many ways to get our emotional food, our soul bread, from sources that do not make us whole — from food that may keep us from being spiritually hungry for a time, but with no lasting power. Today, there are people who spend hours each day on the Internet searching for the bread of life and not finding it. Some individuals try to satisfy their spiritual hunger by accumulating material things, but it never works in the long run.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” What are some of the ingredients of this bread of life which promises that we will never be hungry and never be thirsty?

When Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” we need to remember that according to the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as being the “Love of God” in a human being. “The Word, (the love of God) became a human being and dwells among us.”

So, the most basic ingredient in Jesus as the bread of life is the love of God, or as he said in another place, “I am the living bread.” I like to think of it this way: The love of God is the energy that holds the universe together and provides the power for purposeful living in this world. It is the ultimate soul food which is always available.

Once a person knows 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. That appetite, that hunger, is built into us from the moment of our birth, and it can never be satisfied with any kind of soul food made from artificial ingredients. Fake love doesn’t do it. Love substitutes won’t work. When one comes to experience the love of God, then one also knows that he or she has worth, dignity, and self-esteem.

The astonishing news is that this love of God cannot be earned. Too many people still believe they have to earn their worth — that it has to be worked for. So they collect things, buy things, save things, and mistakenly believe that this will add to their worth and self-esteem.

If you have ever had to make out a financial statement, the bottom line is “your net worth.” But this net worth in assets has nothing at all to do with your personal value, your worth as a human being, although there are people who think it does.

Your real net worth is made up of the fact that you are created in God’s image and you are loved and accepted by God. And that love is not, cannot be earned in any way — it is freely given. All you have to do is accept the gift.

But how do you begin to accept such a gift? By living it. Here’s what one woman said in a commencement speech this past spring:

“I am a good mother to three children. I have tried never to let my profession stand in the way of being a good parent. I no longer consider myself the center of the universe. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh. I am a good friend to my husband. I have tried to make my marriage vows mean what they say. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh. I am a good friend to my friends, and they to me. Without them, there would be nothing to say to you today, because I would be a cardboard cutout. But I call them on the phone and I meet them for lunch. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh. I would be rotten, or at best mediocre at my job if those other things were not true. You cannot be really first-rate at your work if your work is all you are. So here’s what I tell you today: Get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house.... Get a life in which you are generous. Look around at the azaleas in the neighborhood where you grew up; look at a full moon hanging silver in a black, black sky on a cold night. And realize that life is the best thing ever and that you have no business taking it for granted. Care so deeply about its goodness that you want to spread it around... work in a soup kitchen. Be a big brother or sister. All of you want to do well. But if you don’t do good, then doing well will never be enough.”

This speaker said, “Get a life.” Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” God’s love is the basic ingredient in the bread of life. Love of God and love of neighbor go together. We experience the love of God, the bread of life, most deeply in the act of loving others and in their loving us.

God exists in relationships. In other words, to be alive and human, you have to be in contact with other people. When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, the love of God is the electricity that surges between them.

The bread of life with its basic ingredient of love becomes active in your life when you begin to realize that each one of us is dependent upon others, and the proper response is gratitude.

Sometimes, in the daily challenges that life gives us, we miss what is truly important. We may fail to say hello, please, or thank you, congratulate someone on something wonderful that has happened to them, give a compliment, or just do something nice for no reason. We fail to recognize the bread of life that is being given to us in so many small ways through the actions of others.

Here’s a true story that’s been helpful to me. Charles Plumb was a jet pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy hands. He was captured and spent six years in a communist

Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal and now lectures on lessons learned from that experience.

One day, when Plumb and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, a man at another table came up and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down.”

“How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb.

“I packed your parachute,” the man replied.

Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man pumped his hand and said, “I guess it worked.”

Plumb assured him, “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man. Plumb says, “I kept wondering what he might have looked like in a Navy uniform, a white hat, a bib in the back, and bell-bottom trousers. I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said good morning or how are you or anything because you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor.”

Plumb thought of the many hours the sailor had spent on a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn’t know.

Now Plumb asks his audience, “Who’s packing your parachute?” In religious language, another way of asking the question is: Where are you getting the bread of life?

Everyone has someone or several people who provide what they need to make it through the day. The bread of life which Jesus offers comes in many forms. Plumb also points out that he needed many kinds of parachutes when his plane was shot down over enemy territory — he needed his physical parachute, his mental parachute, his emotional parachute, and his spiritual parachute. He called on these supports before reaching safety. As you go through this week, this month, this year, recognize people who pack your parachute and thereby help feed you the bread of life.

“I am the bread of life,” said Jesus. This bread is available every day in many forms and from people you might least expect it. Receive it with gratitude. Once you begin to eat this bread, you will know that it’s not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts. Amen.