Sunday, August 10, 2003
THE BREAD OF LIFE
John 6:35,41-42,48-51

Jesus constantly used metaphors to describe himself and his ministry. For example, in today's scripture reading, he said, "I am the bread of life." He said in another place, "I am the good shepherd." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Many of his parables are metaphors in the form of a story. His early followers remembered his healing episodes and other miracle stories not only because of the events themselves but also as metaphors for what he taught. Thus, when he healed a man of blindness, it was a reminder that all people are blind in one way or another. We all have a vision deficit disorder. Another metaphor frequently used in the Bible to describe Jesus is "the Lamb of God."

Human beings are metaphor-creating creatures. In her book, Letters to a Young Therapist, Mary Pipher describes how important it is for therapists to help clients find suitable metaphors for understanding their problems. For example, if your life seems to be going nowhere, you could define it as a "holding pattern."

Mary says that she learned how to create metaphors from her parents and other relatives. Her dad referred to rich people as being "prosperous as Baptist bootleggers." Her Aunt Margaret called television, "Manure garnished with parsley." Her neighbor described her son, who was very lucky, as "falling in a bucket of pig slop and coming out wearing a new suit." My dad used to say about someone who was very lucky, "That person could fall into a manure pile and come out smelling like a rose." You've heard the metaphor, "She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth." Another one I heard last week was: "He was born on third base and thought he had hit a triple."

Sometimes, when I talk with couples who are about to be married, I describe the marriage ceremony as being like the kick-off at a football game. You need it to begin the marriage, but it's not the most important thing in a marriage. I tell them, you can make mistakes in the kick-off and still win the game. You can also have a perfect kick-off and lose the game. So, don't make it more important than it is.

Think of the many metaphors you use to describe your life. Life is a journey. Life is a feast. Life is a test. Life is a jail sentence. Life is a garden, sometimes filled with weeds and at other times beautiful flowers — and sometimes it is weeds and flowers mixed. Life is a rat race. You can win the race and still be a rat.

Someone said, "All metaphors are imperfect, and that is the beauty of them." Imperfect as they are, good metaphors are very helpful. They help explain life.

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) When Jesus used that metaphor, some of his listeners took it literally rather than seeing it as a metaphor. According to John's gospel, they said, "How can he be the bread of life? Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary? Did Mary and Joseph have a loaf of bread for a baby?" Others asked, "If we follow him, does that mean we will never have any physical hunger or thirst?"

It's like that other metaphor which describes Jesus as the Lamb of God. Did Mary have a little lamb? Another metaphor that Jesus used was the term "born again" or "born from above."

Nicodemus first took that phrase too literally and asked, “How can a person enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time?”

I especially like the metaphor of Jesus saying, “I am the bread of life,” because all of us are familiar with bread — ordinary, everyday bread. There is white bread, corn bread, oatmeal bread, whole wheat bread, rye bread, multi-grain bread, raisin-nut bread, sprouted-wheat bread, and more.

It’s fascinating to read the labels on bread, which describe the ingredients. A loaf of bread I bought last week listed the following ingredients on the label: 100% stone-ground whole wheat flour, (niacin, iron, thiamin, riboflavin), honey, oatmeal, wheat gluten, vegetable shortening, soy flour, rye flour, flaked whole wheat, cornmeal, yeast, salt, and diamalt. The label also said: 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. When I think of Jesus as being the bread of life, I never think of him as having any artificial ingredients.

“I am the bread of life” is a useful metaphor because bread is one food that is common to all human beings in all cultures, although there are many varieties. In the culture in which Jesus lived, bread was one of the main foods, and it was to be found on every table. In that culture, bread was sacred. People would take oaths by touching and kissing it. Bread was a sacred bond between friends and the sign of intimate relationships. 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 phrase, “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. It is significant that he did not say, “I am the meat of life,” or “I am the fruit of life,” or “I am the dessert of life,” or “I am the salad of life,” or “I am the spinach of life.”

Now let’s examine how this metaphor applies to your life today. To begin, it offers a word of caution: be careful so that you do not settle for food that masquerades as the bread of life but is filled with artificial ingredients. There’s a lot of that being offered today. There are all kinds of spiritual movements that promise peace of mind but have no lasting power.

What then are some of the main ingredients in the bread of life that Jesus offers? The most basic ingredient in this bread is the love of God. This love of God is the “living bread.” I’ve found it helpful in my life to think of it this way: The love of God is the energy that holds creation together. It provides the power for purposeful living in this world. It is the ultimate soul food, which is always available and is eternal.

Once a person knows that he or she is loved and accepted by God, a basic and deep hunger begins to be 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. You can try to satisfy this hunger with all sorts of artificial foods and fast foods. There are those who try to satisfy this hunger by collecting things. They buy more and more stuff. They mistakenly believe that this will add to their self-worth and self-esteem.

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

Your real net worth comes from the fact that you are created in God’s image, and you are loved and accepted by God. That love is freely given to you. It cannot be earned in any way. All you have to do is accept it. It is truly the bread of life.

However, accepting this love is sometimes difficult for people. You have to begin to live it. Here’s how one woman described it in a commencement speech: “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 am a good friend to my friends, and they are to me. Without them, there would be nothing to say to you today because I would be a cardboard cut-out. I call them on the phone, and I meet them for lunch. I repeat: I show up. I listen. I 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. Realize that life is the best thing ever, and 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. You begin to experience this love of God — you begin to eat the bread of life — when you begin to love others. You experience God’s love primarily in relationships. When you relate to another person or persons in groups authentically and humanly, the love of God is the electricity that surges between you.

A second ingredient in this “bread of life,” found in the Christian way, is reverence. Reverence is a forgotten character trait in today’s world. What is meant by the word “reverence"? Reverence begins in an understanding of your human limitations. It is related to humility. When you are “reverent,” you are aware that much of what goes on in your life and in the world at large is beyond your control. The opposite of reverence is excessive pride. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps you from acting like God.

Reverence is what lies behind basic civility, good manners, gratitude, and all of the graces that make life in society bearable and pleasant. It is an important ingredient in the bread of life because it keeps you from being pompous and stuck-up. It helps you to laugh at yourself and with others. It reminds you that you are part of a community and that your rituals and ceremonies are important to the health of that community. To have reverence is to have the knowledge that there is much in life that is sacred.

Reverence in today’s world is an endangered character quality. Look at the way many people drive their cars on the highways — selfishly, recklessly, inconsiderately. It’s called “road rage.” The “get-out-of-my-way-I’ve-got-a-bigger-car” syndrome is the opposite of reverence.

Another symptom of the loss of reverence is that some people have no hesitation these days in claiming that God is planning to vote a certain way in an election or that God is on their side. People who claim to know the mind of God lack reverence.

A third basic ingredient in the bread of life that Jesus offers is compassion. Over and over again, Jesus lived and taught the principle, “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.”

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.” Amen.