

## THE REAL WONDER BREAD

John 6:51-59

Sixth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, July 12, 2009

I wonder? Has anyone had any Wonder Bread lately? You do know what Wonder Bread is, don't you? Just in case you don't, it all started back in 1921 when an Indianapolis baking company, Taggart, produced a loaf of bread and wrapped it in a package with colorful red, blue, and yellow balloons. Wonder Bread was born and since those beginning days, Wonder Bread has continued to change the times and change with the times.

In 1925 Continental Baking Company did a novel thing after purchasing Taggart. Continental decided to slice the bread, making WB the first bread ever to be sliced. That inspired a phrase that's still used: "the best thing since sliced bread." And baking companies have been slicing bread ever since, with a short hiatus during the 1940s when metal was being used for the machinery of international conflict during World War II. During this time of no slices, Wonder Bread became one of the first breads to give a boost to its white bread with eight fundamental vitamins and minerals.<sup>1</sup> I sound like a commercial, don't I?

I suppose that one of the many wonderfully wonder things about Wonder Bread is that you can purchase all kinds of it. There's Wonder Classic White, Wonder Classic White Sandwich, Wonder Kids, Wonder Texas Toast, Wonder Whole Grain White, Wonder Buttermilk Bread, Wonder Potato Bread, Wonder Light Bread, Wonder Stoneground 100% Whole Wheat, Wonder Soft 100% Whole Wheat, Wonder Whole Grain Wheat, Wonder Whole Grain Honey Wheat, and Wonder Light Wheat, not to mention an assortment of hamburger and hotdog buns.

I need to stop. Wonder why? I'm making us all sort of hungry for bread — any kind, Wonder or not. Would that we might get as hungry for another Wonder Bread that was baked long, long ago by a Master Baker, every time we hear it mentioned or even when we don't hear it mentioned. This particular Wonder Bread is real and it certainly is the best bread ever. The arrival of this Bread is the best thing that ever happened — before and after sliced bread. This is, by the way, no ordinary bread.

In his excellent book, The Rest Is Noise, which is a history of music in the twentieth century that I heard Terry Lowry recommend at a performance of the Carroll Symphony Orchestra last Fall and given to me by Emily for Christmas last year, New York Times' Music Critic, Alex Ross, tells of a spring evening in 1928 when the famed creator of *Rhapsody in Blue*, George Gershwin, visited in the Vienna home of the internationally renowned composer, Alban Berg. To welcome Gershwin, Berg arranged for a string quartet to perform his masterpiece, *Lyric Suite*. Following the excellent performance, Gershwin went to the piano to play some of his songs. He hesitated for Berg's work had left him mesmerized with intimidation. Berg's music was no ordinary music. Gershwin wondered if his own creations were even worthy to be performed. Berg looked at him and sternly said, "Mr. Gershwin, music is music."<sup>2</sup>

OK. Music is music. But to borrow the insight of Duke Ellington, there are two kinds of music: good and bad. You can tell the difference by listening carefully. So it's really not that simple, Mr. Berg. There is music and then there is music. It's tempting to think and easy to believe that "bread is bread." But it isn't. There is bread and then there is bread. There is Wonder Bread, which is ordinary and then there is Real Wonder Bread, which has no ordinariness about it.

As we've observed, John 6 provides a wonderful word about Wonder Bread — Real Wonder Bread. Jesus the Christ is the Bread of Life that came down from God above. Jesus the Christ is Bread for the World. Jesus the Christ is Wonder Bread — I mean the Real Wonder Bread. And while it is easy for some — even some Christians maybe right here among us in Tabernacle — to put, out of fairness I reckon, the Buddha types and the Confucius types and the Mohammad types and the Secular Humanists types and the Gnostic types and our own personal god types at ease by saying, "religion is religion," we are to understand, contrary to Mr. Berg's word to Mr. Gershwin back in 1928, it's not that simple. There is religion and then there is Religion. There is faith and then there is Faith. There is the bread from Near Eastern and Far Eastern religions and then there is the Bread of Life.

Gathered in a teaching environment there in Capernaum's synagogue, Jesus did His best to help those Galilean Jews, who were religious leaders among the people, understand that it was simple but at the same time it wasn't so simple. Simply put, He wanted them to understand who He was and what His mission was. Jesus challenged them to realize there was bread and then there was bread. That challenge created some consternation. Already they had begun to complain because He said He was the Bread of Life. Now to their credit, at least they were thinking about what He said, whereas so many of us are inclined to put our brains in check and not think at all.

But now their grumbling was carried to an even more intense level, because, not only did He say that He was the Bread of Life, but He also said they are to eat this bread so they and the whole world will live forever. ***"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh"*** (v. 51)

Obviously Jesus was pointing to His death for humanity. We get that. But those synagogue-goers that day up in Capernaum didn't. A ***"dispute"*** (v. 52) among those listeners began. The Greek word translated ***"dispute"*** conveys a hotly debated issue. Literally it means to "fight." They passionately fought in debate over what Jesus meant. One had this interpretation and another had that interpretation and still another had an altogether different meaning of Jesus' words about eating His flesh.

To make matters even worse for those arguing, Jesus, the Master Teacher, certainly didn't help. He compounded the whole thing with even more confusing and offensive words. According to verse 54, not only were they supposed to eat His flesh, the Bread, but also they were to ***"drink his [my] blood."*** This is vampire language! To eat flesh and drink blood, according to Jewish Law in the Torah, was an outrage. For the record, there is no indication the hearers thought Jesus was suggesting ritual cannibalism. They just couldn't figure what He was talking about in His words. Talk about a meaning for "sliced bread"! How do you slice Jesus up and eat Him? They may have been thinking something like that.

As we read these words today, it is just so difficult for any of us to fully appreciate how offensive these words were to the hearers. It would be like cussing granddaddy for no reason at the annual family Thanksgiving Dinner. Or think of the most offensive word there is or at least what you believe to be most offensive. It would be like Jesus saying it so all could hear. Even the Twelve must have been somewhat insulted by Jesus saying, "You have to eat me, eat my flesh, and drink my blood. If you'll do that, you'll have eternal life, meaningful life right now, and you'll experience resurrection on the last day."

What Jesus was suggesting with His imagery, His metaphors, far exceeded the imagery of Passover. The truth is that within the Judaism of His day, it was near, if not, incomprehensible altogether. His audience was stunned as they heard graphic, compelling, and utterly confusing words. The Hebrew Scripture scholars among them could relate nothing in what He said to an episode in their salvation history. The closest metaphor that comes to it is, perhaps, in the Old Testament Lesson from Proverbs 9:1-6. There Lady Wisdom prepares a banquet of choice meat, bread, and wine. She invites the simple and the naive to gather at her table.

These metaphors of eating and drinking have Lord's Supper overtones in them. But there is more. They suggest that coming to Jesus Christ and believing in Him results in life — a real life of wonder. Like Lady Wisdom in the Proverbs, Jesus invited His listeners to a banquet of eternal life that came by way of a death — His flesh and blood.

Our fifth century ancestor, the great doctor and bishop of the church in Hippo, Northern Africa, Augustine, noted the Lord's language proposes that the hearer and the reader are to connect with Jesus in His passion, and to gladly treasure in their hearts, for their own spiritual benefit, memories, even if imaginatively, of the fact that, for our sakes and the sakes of all people, He was crucified and pierced.<sup>3</sup> Another way of looking at it is that whenever Christ is brought into our lives by faith not only is there an assurance of life in the age to come when He raises us up in resurrection, but there is also an enjoyment of life in the here and now as we anticipate life in the there and then.

This life for us is secured by way of a death: Jesus gives His flesh and His blood in voluntary and vicarious sacrifice. So the true sustenance and refreshment of our spiritual lives are to be found only in Jesus Christ who lived and died and was raised from the dead so that we might live. We are, then, to feed on Him, the Real Wonder Bread, in and by faith — not only in the Eucharistic meal of the Lord’s Supper at the Holy Table, but in baptism, in the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture in private and corporate worship, in prayer and fasting and meditation and other spiritual disciplines. So music isn’t just music and religion isn’t just religion and bread isn’t just bread.

Jesus is the Real Wonder Bread who grants life that is full of real wonder. I finished a book yesterday by Brian McClaren titled, Finding Our Way Again: The Return to the Ancient Practices, which is the first in a series of eight books, being published over the course of three years, with the final two books being released next year, which deal with spiritual formation under the theme “The Ancient Practices.” In this introductory book, McClaren makes the observation that the purpose of ancient spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, Sabbath, sacred meals, pilgrimage, tithing, and rhythm is to make us not more religious, but to make us more alive — more alive to God, to our spouse, a special friend, parents, children, neighbors, even enemies.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual practices are to make us alive to everything.

After reading the chapter calling attention to this aliveness early Friday morning, I took our dog, Kiwi, for her daily morning walk around Allison Circle. I said, “Lord, during this walk, I’m going to be alive.” So I listened to the birds singing as if they were God. I felt the gentle breeze as if it was the Holy Spirit touching me. I watched Kiwi walk, and then chase a cardinal, then howl at a cat as if God was ordering her every move or was doing the walking, chasing, and howling. I looked upward at a nearly full moon acknowledging that God had hung it there. I felt my mussels loosening, realizing that I was alive because a Holy Other had created me. I kept my focus, during this whole time, on Christ. After completing the six-tenths of a mile, reflecting on what I had just done it was like taking a bite of Wonder Bread for the very first time. I sensed I was very much alive. I was also full of real wonder.

Let us be a people who feast daily on Jesus Christ in everything that we do and think. He is the Real Wonder Bread. So let’s have a slice or two of Him daily. Focus on the whole loaf, though, if you want to be more and more alive. I wonder? Have you had any Real Wonder Bread lately? You do know what Real Wonder Bread is, don’t you? Of course you do.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
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**Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989**

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<sup>1</sup>“From a One Hit Wonder” [http://www.wonderbread.com/#/about\\_wonder\\_bread/history](http://www.wonderbread.com/#/about_wonder_bread/history) (Irving, TX: Interstate Bakeries Corporation, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Alex Ross, The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (New York: Picador, 2007), p. xv.

<sup>3</sup> From F. F. Bruce, The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Brian D. McClaren, Finding Our Way Again: The Return to the Ancient Practices in “The Ancient Practices Series” (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 182.