INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, I've preached a lot from the Old Testament and the New Testament epistles, or letters. So, I decided that it would be a good time now to delve into the New Testament gospels, which are the stories and teachings of Jesus. Later in the fall, we'll be reading and preaching from the Gospel according to Mark. But, for what's left of summer, I want us to focus our attention on the Gospel according to John. It's there, in that unique gospel, that we find seven different "I am" statements of Jesus. By "I am" statements, I mean such things as "I am the light of the world; I am the gate; and I am the true vine." Today we begin with Jesus' statement in John chapter 6. What does it mean for us that Jesus said, "I am the bread of life"?

1. GOD PROVIDES FOR OUR MATERIAL NEEDS

The first and most obvious meaning of "I am the bread of life" is that God provides for our material needs. By using the words "I am," Jesus was reminding his fellow Jews of the name by which God identified himself to Moses from the burning bush. In Exodus chapter 3, God told Moses, "I am who I am," refusing at that time to be pinned down any more than that. But, in the Gospel according to John, Jesus uses many metaphors to tell his listeners who the God of Moses is. Here in chapter 6, Jesus says that God is the bread of life who provides food for our hungry bellies. Just as God provided manna for the Hebrews to eat while they were wandering in the wilderness, so God takes care of our physical needs today. In the earlier verses of John chapter 6, Jesus multiplied five small barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed 5000 hungry
people. Just like that, God cares about our material problems today. Just like that, God is watching over us and multiplying resources to help us today--not only with food and drink but with housing, utilities, and clothing; auto payments and credit card debt, too.

That doesn't mean that money is going to start growing on trees. It doesn't mean our bank accounts will suddenly become flush. But it does mean that if we have faith to trust in God, God will provide. Maybe not what we want. Maybe not even what we think we need. But what we really and truly need. Might we need to cut back on some things that we've come to expect? Yes, we might. Might we have to readjust our thinking about what is essential? Yes, of course. Might we have to become more grateful for what we do have? Sure enough.

Let's go back to the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The huge crowd was gathered to hear Jesus' teaching. But they were hungry and far from home, and there weren't any stores nearby where they could purchase food. When disciple Andrew found a boy who was willing to share his five loaves and two fish, Jesus didn't worry and complain that it wasn't enough. Instead, Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. He was appreciative of the little there was and saw abundance in it. Somehow Jesus' gratitude was enough to turn the small quantity of food into a feast that satisfied the needs of thousands.

Gratitude, simplicity, budgetary self-discipline, and a willingness to seek help are all necessary for stretching our resources. If we can do some of that, then God, our bread of life, will absolutely provide for our material needs.

2. GOD PROVIDES FOR OUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," a second meaning was that God will provide for our spiritual needs. That's why this bread of life is even better than their ancestors' manna from heaven. That's why this bread of life is even better than the multiplied loaves that had just
fed the 5000. As wonderful and miraculous as those kinds of physical bread are, we human beings need more. In John 6:58, Jesus reminds his Jewish listeners that the manna from heaven filled the bellies of their Hebrew ancestors and satisfied them for a time. But eventually, those folks all died off. No matter how much material bread God provides for us, it won't keep us alive forever. Wheat, barley, rye, and gluten-free aren't enough. For ultimate satisfaction, we need to feast on the bread of life that touches our souls.

The gospel of John calls this ultimate satisfaction "eternal life." In John's gospel "eternal life" has two different nuances of meaning. One is time based, as in going on forever and ever, starting at the time of our death. The other meaning of eternal life is a quality of life that begins now, even while we are still alive. When we eat of the bread of life, we gain hope, purpose, and direction. When we eat of the bread of life, we grow in peace, justice, and wisdom. When we eat of the bread of life, we experience comfort in distress and challenge to our complacency. When we eat the bread of life, we so follow the example of Christ that we advocate for the poor and downtrodden, the under-privileged and under-served—even if that means confronting the people and places of power in our society—even if that means carrying the cross of suffering.

In 2004, I went on a mission trip to the country of Guatemala. The leader of our mission trip was a guy named Mark Eli. Mark is a member of Trinity United Methodist Church in Denver, and he has a deep passion for helping the extremely poor people of that Central American country. But it wasn't always that way. Right out of college, Mark went into the world of high-tech computers and communications. He quickly moved up the corporate ladder, made a lot of money, and was living the high life. But, after one mission trip to Guatemala, he gave up his high-tech career and began living a life of simplicity and service. Mark moved out
of his expensive house and began living in the basement of his friends' house, so he could devote himself to improving education and the quality of life for the poor of Guatemala.

In fact, when we were on our 2004 mission trip, Mark was living so frugally that he didn't even possess a watch. That was a bit of a handicap for keeping us all on schedule, so a couple of us team members pitched in and bought him one at the local market. He was grateful, of course. But, for Mark, what was and is most important is not possessing material things that are fleeting because they help only himself. For him, having the God-given and much more lasting purpose of educating a generation of Guatemalan youth so they can change their country's future is far more important. Eating the bread of life means experiencing eternal life as God provides for our spiritual needs.

3. GOD IS PRESENT WITH US IN THE SACRAMENTAL MEAL

A third meaning of "I am the bread of life" is that God is present with us in the sacramental meal. When we participate in holy communion, God becomes incarnate among us. Just as God was once present in the human flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, now God is with us in the bread and the juice.

In the first and second centuries of Christianity, many people refused to accept Christian beliefs because they were turned off by the cannibalistic idea of eating Christ's flesh and drinking Christ's blood. Even today, I find that to be an unpleasant concept. I've always been glad that we Protestants believe that the consecrated bread and cup are symbolic and metaphorical, that they are served in remembrance of Jesus, rather than the Catholic belief that, during the mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.

What's important for us is to recognize that just as God could be fully present in the human being Jesus, so can God be present in the bread and juice that we touch with our hands
and taste with our mouths. This bread feeds our bodies, and this God feeds our souls. In this act of worship, in this act of Christians gathered together in faith community, God is here--filling us and nourishing us. God is strengthening our hearts and our arms and our legs so that we can be the hands and feet of Jesus, so that we can offer healing and hope to the poor, the sick, and the discouraged. Through the bread, through its physical and spiritual vitamins that enter our cells and stimulate our neurons, God enters into us, giving us life for ourselves and the ability to bring about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. So, today and whenever you receive holy communion, I hope you will have this experience in yourself. When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," he meant that God is present with us in the sacramental meal.

**CONCLUSION**

Twelve years ago, I first read about a food that has been gaining popularity in Africa. It comes from the Moringa tree. The Moringa tree produces leaves, pods, seeds, and flowers that all have amazing properties. Food scientists verify that Moringa can rebuild weak bones, enrich anemic blood, treat diabetes, and lower blood pressure. Ounce for ounce, Moringa has the potassium of three bananas, the calcium of four glasses of milk, the beta carotene of four carrots, and the vitamin C of seven oranges. While Moringa alone can't solve all the world's malnutrition problems, hunger experts are eagerly trying to change people's dietary habits to include this miracle food from God.*

Whether we're talking about physical food or spiritual food, God is the one who provides it for us. That's what the sacrament of holy communion is about. And that's what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the bread of life."