

Miracles of Provision, Calm, and Delight
Miracles Series: Stories of God's Generosity
Sermon on John 6:1-35 (8/8 & 8/9/15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Both my sister and brother-in-law have studied to be Lutheran pastors. They have each completed the academic work they needed and my brother-in-law is now at the beginning of a required, year-long, full-time pastoral internship in Bozeman, Montana.

My sister did her own pastoral internship two years ago in suburban Tucson, Arizona. During their year in Bozeman, she is working at a local coffee shop but, to help keep her pastoral skills in shape, my sister has made it known to Bozeman-area Lutheran pastors that she is available to preach when they are away from their churches.

Five days of my recent vacation were spent in Bozeman with my sister and brother-in-law...and, wouldn't you know it, but my sister happens to be preaching *this* weekend on the very same passage of Scripture which has *our* attention today here at McCabe – this passage from chapter six of the Gospel of John.

“I am the bread that gives life,” Jesus said to the gathered crowd. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry. No one who has faith in me will ever be thirsty.”

Before we went to worship at Hope Lutheran Church in Bozeman last Sunday morning – the church where my brother-in-law is serving as the pastoral intern – my sister and I spent 20 or 30 minutes talking about these words of Jesus: “I am the bread that gives life.” //

If I may say so, we often have a complicated relationship with *bread* in our culture these days, don't we? Whether we need gluten-free, or we're trying to watch our carbs, or we need high fiber, *bread* is just kind of complicated. Sometimes it's complicated because we have legitimate health concerns to care for...and sometimes we simply make it more complicated than it needs to be.

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When I was a kid, bread was not a staple on my family meal table – unless, of course, it was somehow a main feature, like, if we were having French toast or grilled cheese. My grandparents' table was another matter, however: there was always a well-stocked bread plate and a nice, soft stick of butter on the table. Bread was absolutely a staple for them.

That was also the case for the people in Jesus' time. The baking of bread was a primary activity for the women in every household because bread was a necessary part of most meals. Almost as if it were *required*. It was that important. And it's critically important for us modern folks to keep that in mind as we think about the text for today from John chapter six.

Jesus' words “I am the bread that gives life” will make absolutely no sense if we think of *bread* as an optional add-on...or as something we simply can't or won't eat,

for whatever reasons. That said, however, it may not be wholly out-of-line to think about Jesus, the bread of life, as one with whom you have a complicated relationship...but that's perhaps a different sermon for another day!)

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Early this summer here at McCabe United Methodist Church, we began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*.

To kick-off this focus on generosity, we explored many of Jesus' parables – many of the stories he told. When you explore Jesus' parables, you discover that many of them, at their core, are about *generosity*: about *God's* generosity toward us...and about how *we*, in turn, are to be generous toward others – generous in our thoughts and with our words, generous with our time, energy, and money.

So we started our year-long, generosity focus with a series on stories *about* God's generosity. Now, we are beginning a four-week series on stories *of* God's generosity – stories where God's generosity is made real through miraculous events.

Though there are miraculous events throughout the Bible, we'll be looking specifically at miracles in the Gospel of John. Through this series, I hope we'll all become ever more watchful for God's miraculous generosity.

Because God's miraculous generosity is on display *all* the time, all around us...but, so often, life gets crowded and we miss it.

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One of my favorite writers is a woman named Lauren Winner. She is a bit older than I am and, through a very circuitous journey of faith, she went from being an Orthodox Jew in youth and young adulthood to being ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in her 30's.

Lauren Winner's writings are thoughtful, humorous, and they inspire me to deeper understandings of who God is and how we are called to be faithful in this life. Her most recent book is about many of the different images that are used in the Bible to speak about God.

The book is called *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* and, in it, she devoted an entire chapter to the image of God as “bread.” //

When we think about God as “bread” I would hazard a guess that many of us naturally think about how God feeds us *spiritually* – that we are sustained and blessed by God's very presence...and by reading the Bible and studying prayerfully with our brothers and sisters in Christ. To think and speak of God as “bread” *is* very much these things. Of course we are sustained and blessed by God's very presence and by studying God's word in the Bible.

But Lauren Winner's words in her chapter about God as *bread* helped me think in an even bigger way about what this image means. And, of course, on a day like today when we are exploring Jesus' words about being the "bread that gives life" I couldn't help but think about words from Lauren Winner's *bread* chapter – especially because she also talks about the bread of Holy Communion, which we will celebrate shortly. In one section of this chapter, she wrote:

"To say that God is bread is to say something about variety and delight. There are quick breads and slow double-rising breads ... There is [sourdough] and Russian black bread and banana bread and cornbread and brioche. There is ... Irish soda bread [and] Amish friendship bread...oatmeal bread, gingerbread...there are biscuits and crumpets and scones.

"At the altar, [in Holy Communion], that [diversity] of bread shrinks. I have never seen morning glory muffins at the altar." She then goes on to talk of an experience making chocolate zucchini bread with her friend, Sarah. About this, she said:

"Sarah and I wondered aloud about celebrating [Holy Communion] with this bread, with our families or with friends from across the street, but it was a half-wondering, and in the end, we did not. Sarah sensed we would have to explain it – there was 'regular' bread in her kitchen after all ... [When he said to remember him with bread,] Jesus hadn't meant cocoa and zucchini, surely."

Then, on the general subject of Communion, Lauren Winner wrote: "Some days I wish our [Communion] meal in church were a bit more like a real meal, thick slices of focaccia and glasses of cabernet."

Sidenote: As in many other churches, Episcopalians use wine during Communion. Since we United Methodists use grape juice, it may be difficult for some of us to even *imagine* large glasses of wine during the Lord's Supper!

And, of course, I've heard often about the benefit to using grape juice during Communion as a helpful consideration for those among us who struggle with alcohol addiction.

But, as a bit of a historical awareness piece, in the Jewish Passover meal – the last meal Jesus celebrated with his first disciples – they would have each had *four* glasses of wine – *real* wine – during the course of the meal. Keep that in mind because, when we look at John chapter two in a couple of weeks – the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee – we'll come face-to-face with a whole lot of wine!

Anyway, the section of Lauren Winner's chapter about God as *bread* concludes with these words:

"...I have come to appreciate the small [Communion] wafer, the small sip of wine. In the Holy Eucharist, we take a miniature sip of wine and a small bite of [bread], and we call this God's abundance.

“I believe by regularly proclaiming that God's abundance can be found in something small, we are gradually retooling our understanding of what is really necessary for life.”¹

I just love those words. And, as I said a bit ago, I couldn't help but think of them when I was reflecting on today's reading from John six.

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At first read-through, today's reading from John chapter six seems like two distinct stories:

The first story is, of course, the story of Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of 5,000-plus with only five loaves of bread and two fish. (I say “5,000-plus” because this translation of the Bible says “about 5,000 *men* were in the crowd.” And, let's be honest, if there were 5,000 *men* gathered in one place, there were bound to be some women present as well. Some children, too.)

So, the first story is the miraculous feeding of the really big crowd – a miracle of feeding many with very little. The second story, then, is the story of Jesus walking on water, calming the fears of his disciples as the harsh wind blew.

At first read-through these seem like disconnected stories.

There's no obvious reason why we would read them together – why not simply focus on the miraculous feeding and then, another time, read the story of the miraculous walking on water...the miraculous calming of fears? Why not read these stories separately and give each of them the proper focus they deserve?

Well, friends, we should read these two stories together because they are not two separate stories at all.

In the first part of today's reading we had disciples who couldn't seem to get past the fact that they didn't have enough money or food to feed a huge and hungry crowd. They didn't have a year's wages handy: they only had five loaves of bread and two fish. (Which, remember, were gifts from some kid in the crowd.)

Of course...they also had *Jesus*...but, for some reason, they didn't remember to factor him into the equation. They got so lost in the details of feeding thousands of people with no money and hardly any food that they forgot about the One who is enough for every need.

When the miraculous feeding was done and the day was over, the disciples got into a boat and began crossing the Sea to go home – leaving Jesus behind. While they were on the boat, a great wind came up and the water got rough. They were afraid. Understandably so.

¹ Winner, Lauren F. *Wearing God*. pp. 101-103.

As they furiously rowed to the other side, Jesus performed his second miracle that day as he walked out *on* the water to join his fearful disciples. “I am Jesus,” he said to them as he approached, “Don’t be afraid!”

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There’s a scene in the Old Testament where Moses asks what God’s name is...and God’s response was the Hebrew phrase meaning “I AM.” In Hebrew, the full meaning of this phrase is actually “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” So *that* is God’s name: “I AM.”

This name for God is used nearly 7,000 times in the Old Testament. It is significant – and its meaning is extremely holy: “I AM.” “I will be who I will be.”

This name is God’s way of saying, “Because I AM, you needn’t fear.”

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It is no accident that, in today’s reading from John 6, Jesus used the phrase “I am” not once, but twice. He used it first as he calmed the disciples’ fears in the midst of the turbulent sea: “I am Jesus,” he said while walking to them on the water, “Don’t be afraid!”

By walking on water in the midst of a windstorm, Jesus taught the disciples that, in some mysterious way, he was part of God’s very self, that he was One who could bring order in the midst of chaos, just as God had done in the beginning, at Creation.

Then, the next day, Jesus used that holiest of phrases – “I AM” – yet again. Many folks in the crowd from the previous day found Jesus across the sea and asked him about God. Jesus explained that God wanted them to believe in him...to believe that he was the one God had sent from heaven to give life to the world.

“I am Jesus. Don’t be afraid! ... I am the bread that gives life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry.”

It’s almost as if, with these two phrases, Jesus is really saying, “I am enough to feed you physically...I am enough to feed you spiritually...I am enough to find you when you get lost...I am enough to draw you back in when you stray...I am enough to keep you steady when harsh winds blow in and out of your life...I am enough to calm you when you are afraid...”

“I am enough...because I AM.”

He is more than enough...even when a year’s wages would be needed to provide... even when all there is are 5 barley loaves and 2 fish...even when there are more than 5,000 to be fed. Because *he* is enough, and there *is* more than enough – more than enough, and with leftovers!

Jesus Christ. Bread of Life. Lord of all creation. Shepherd of our souls. Holy miracle-worker. The Great I AM.

He provides for our daily needs. He calms us when we are afraid. And you know what else? He delights in us.

God loves this world so much that Jesus came to be one of us...to be *with* us, to prove God's love – to prove that God provides for us and calms us not only out of obligation as our Creator, but also out of sheer *delight* as our loving, heavenly Parent.

And that delight can be experienced, say...when we eat morning glory muffins, or chocolate zucchini bread, and, of course, when we eat the bread of Holy Communion.

What good news. What abundant, miraculous generosity. Thanks be to God.