

## **WONDER BREAD – August 6, 2006**

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC

The 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:24-35

Ah, Wonder Bread. The name evokes memories of soft and squishy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, light and airy bologna sandwiches, and the only bread crust that I ever ate as a kid. The name came from the wonder of seeing a sky filled with hot air balloons, and if you look at the packaging, you can still see those balloons in the red, blue, and yellow bubbles. But it's Wonder Bread historically for a much more important reason: Wonder Bread was the first national brand enriched with vitamins that provided poor people with necessary nutrients to help eliminate Pellagra and Beriberi as common American diseases. There began a trend that has led today to so many vitamin and mineral enrichments that it is technically possible to eat a balanced diet – vitamin and mineral wise, at least – without ever consuming a fruit or a vegetable. But have you noticed that as good as Wonder Bread is, they keep “improving” it? New recipes, new formulas, new flavors – all to keep up with the American penchant for something new and different every month.

The original Wonder Bread hasn't changed for 2000 years. It won't change for 2000 more years, or 2000 years after that, or indeed, ever – because it has been the same since before the world began. The original Wonder Bread is, of course, Jesus Christ.

He must be Wonder Bread if he promises that we will never be hungry or thirsty again if we but come to him. Two pieces of toast don't really hold me from breakfast to lunch, so how can this “Bread of Life” hold my hunger at bay forever? Now there's a question worthy of the densest witnesses to the feeding of the 5000!

In fact, it's basically the question they ask when they come looking for him, isn't it? Jesus' reply is pointed: “Work for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

What? Sounds like K-rations or MREs, doesn't it?

So the next logical question from the group is, of course, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” There's some speculation among scholars that a more accurate translation of that question from the Greek might be, “What work must we do for God?” Thought of that way, the question is one of earning the food for eternity – or at least for a lifetime.

The work, according to Jesus, is belief – belief that God has sent the Messiah and that Jesus is the Messiah. And the sign of this, Jesus goes on to say in response to the question of manna, is that God gave the Israelites *perishable* bread from heaven through Moses but gives them the Bread of Life through the incarnation, that is, the one who came down from heaven to give life to the world.

Even when the crowd demands that he “Give us this bread always,” we’re forced to wonder if they really understood what they were asking for.

When Jesus identifies himself as “The Bread of Life” in today’s Gospel, he completes a circle begun when he faced Satan in the wilderness. There, when Satan tempted him, Jesus said, “Man cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” The equating of bread with the word of God is important because we know that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate – made flesh to dwell among us.

Shortly thereafter, Jesus’ mother convinces him to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana, and just a little while after that at Jacob’s Well in Samaria, he says to the woman he met there, “No one who drinks the water I give will ever be thirsty again. The water that I give is a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” He reiterates this idea when he reminds his listeners in today’s story that “whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

These four elements – water, wine, bread, and word – are the essential elements of our worship practice today. We use water at baptism; we have unfermented wine and bread during communion; and our weekly services are centered on the hearing and understanding of the word of God.

You can’t have wine or bread without water. Without the Word, wine and bread are simply wine and bread – but with the Word spoken in consecration, bread and wine become reminders of the intense love God has for us even today that he sent his only son to live, die, and rise again for our salvation.

When we are nourished by this Wonder Bread that is Jesus Christ, our physical bodies still hunger and thirst – hence the reason that we ask for God to give us our daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer. We still suffer from the disappointments and sorrows of daily life, sometimes crushingly so. We still question eternal life and still ask questions about the purpose of our lives because we’re human and we’re designed to have both doubts and free will. But when we have eaten of the Bread of Life, when we have been fed until we want no more – and remember my lesson to the children about “want” versus “need” – our souls are satisfied by the constant

presence of Christ in our hearts and minds, by our conviction that God loves us as we are and by our confidence in loving him in return. We have a reservoir to tap when disappointments and sorrows bring us down or when our doubts assail us, an eternal reservoir that will never run dry – or, to continue with the bread imagery, a never-ending breadbox – in Jesus Christ.

So whenever you eat this Wonder Bread, be thankful that the original Wonder Bread is the Bread of Life that will sustain us through the hardest times in our lives and give us deeper joy at the happiest times. And whenever you partake of this communion meal that is spread before us, know that in the taking of the wine and the bread – symbols of the Living Water and the Bread of Life – we are reminded of our place in heaven, where we will see God face to face.