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2 Sam 18; Eph. 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

BREAD OF LIFE TIMES THREE

As most of you know, I am the mother of a 2-year-old. If you've ever spent much time with a 2-year-old, you probably know that kids at this age really enjoy repetition. We read the same books over and over again, sing the same songs over and over again. We practice saying the alphabet and counting to ten, we recite the names of our family and other important people and animals we know, we talk about things we saw and things that happened. Over, and over, and over again.

We do this in part because she wants us to and it makes her happy. But we also do it because that repetition is important to her learning. She is working hard every day to learn English and make sense of the world around her. Repeating things helps her understand and remember them. It's a learning technique that toddlers know instinctively, which is pretty amazing.

This technique works for adults, too, of course. If you're trying to remember a new acquaintance's name, or a phone number, or the combination to unlock a door, you might repeat it over and over in your mind to try to cement it in your memory. I know I do that. Sometimes this technique even works without our effort. For example, I know all of the lyrics to plenty of pop songs I don't especially like, just because I've heard them so many times. We are simply more likely to remember things that we have heard or read repeatedly.

Did you notice that Jesus repeated himself in our Gospel reading today? He made his key point three times in the space of two paragraphs.

Before I get to that, let's review what's happening in this story. Earlier in John chapter 6, the Gospel writer describes how Jesus miraculously turned five barley loaves and two fish into more than enough food for a huge crowd to share. At least 5,000 people were fed with bread and fish as they sat there in the grass, and there were 12 baskets of leftovers.

This crowd was so eager to be with Jesus and to learn from him that the next day they tracked him down again. He accused them of just wanting more of that miracle bread, and in verse 27 said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." This led to a conversation about the manna God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness, and then to today's reading, which begins with John chapter 6, verse 35.

> "Jesus said to them, '**I am the bread of life.** Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"

Despite their obvious enthusiasm for Jesus, the crowd isn't buying this.

> "Isn't this Joseph's son? We know his parents!"

Jesus elaborates a little more, and then says again, "**I am the bread of life.** Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die**. 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."

That's where today's Gospel reading ends, but Jesus' conversation with his followers continued. Do you think he was frustrated by their slowness in catching on? "Pay attention, folks – I'm telling you something really important here. I am the bread of life!"

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It may be easy for us as 21st Century Christians to judge the listeners in this story. Why was it so hard for them to understand what Jesus was saying? They had just seen him perform a miracle – why did they doubt him when they said he had come from heaven? But when I imagine myself in their shoes, I have to admit that I would have been skeptical too. I definitely would have had a lot of questions about what I was seeing and hearing. Thank goodness that Jesus had the patience to repeat this essential message and keep explaining himself to those who would listen.

There are many other examples of repetition in the Bible, both within a particular story or section of text, and among various books. For example, some messages from the Old Testament are repeated or referenced in the New Testament, and some of the stories of Jesus' life and ministry are told in more than one of the Gospels. If you're interested in studying this further, a quick Google search brings up lots of resources on the literary and theological significance of all of this repetition. Though I haven't done a deep dive into that scholarship myself, I think it's safe to say that the repetition is not an accident. There's a reason for it.

Jesus repeated his message to his followers three times in today's reading. Clearly that was necessary for his listeners that day to begin to understand it. But that happened many centuries ago, right? What is the good news for **us** in the way this Gospel story is told? Do we really need to hear Jesus repeat his "I am the bread of life" declaration so many times? Well… yes, I think we do.

When I agreed to preach this Sunday, I hoped that when I read the assigned texts for the week, something would instantly jump out at me. The perfect sermon illustration would come to mind, and the rest would easily follow. Unfortunately, it didn't work that way. The Old Testament reading for today centers around an incredibly deadly battle, the graphic death of Absalom, and King David's grief at his death. It wasn't what I wanted to dwell on this week.

The New Testament reading from Ephesians and today's Gospel reading from John had more to offer, and yet in my initial reading of those lessons I found myself skimming instead of reading closely. These texts felt too familiar to me. As a lifelong, churchgoing Lutheran, I have heard them in worship and read them in Bible studies, multiple times. There's good stuff here, certainly, but it's not new to me, and maybe isn't for you either. What do we gain from reading them again?

Well, the truth is, we are still learning these biblical lessons. The Ephesians text is chock full of guidelines for how we should conduct ourselves personally and in community. I think we can all agree that these are good standards for living as Christians, but try though we might, none of us successfully meets these standards all the time.

Ephesians chapter 4, verses 31 and 32, for example: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Yes, yes! We should definitely do that! Oh, it's hard, though. I don't know about you, but I still have some work to do. Reading these instructions again is a good reminder.

This Gospel, too, is worth hearing again and again. The words may be familiar, from previous readings, banners, altar linens, or bulletin covers you've seen over the years. But really listen to what Jesus is saying here: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Wow!

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I've centered my message today around the idea that repetition is a valuable learning tool – and it is, for adults as well as for toddlers. But there's also another reason why toddlers like to hear and do the same things over and over again. An article I read on parents.com this week put it this way: "While adults crave variety, a toddler needs repeated confirmation that things stay the same."[1]

For a toddler, so much of the world is still new and mysterious. Their brains are working nonstop to process all of this, and sometimes that can get really overwhelming. It's understandable that they crave the reassurance of things that are familiar and unchanging.

Though variety is the spice of life, as they say, we adults too appreciate the reassurance of the familiar. That's another reason to keep revisiting these biblical texts. We may read them differently as we move through our lives; they may raise new questions or give us different insights with each reading. But no matter how chaotic the world around us gets, the good news of the Gospel remains true: Jesus is the bread of life, sent from heaven by a God who loves us more than we can imagine, and those who eat of this bread will have eternal life. We're reminded of this promise each week when we receive the bread of Holy Communion: "This is the body of Christ, given for you."

It is a blessing indeed that God, our heavenly parent, keeps repeating what we need to hear – through the scriptures, through the hymns and liturgies that have sprung from them, through the sacraments we celebrate, and through the people that surround us. Through it all, God is teaching us, and God is reassuring us. Precious child of God, you are loved. You are loved. You are loved.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

[1] https://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/behavioral/why-toddlers-love-repetition/