**Practicing Incarnation**

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In recent decades we’ve come to learn more and more about the conditions of modern life that can pose a threat to our well-being. One of these is known as “Information Overload.” It refers to the excessive flow of data or information that can flood our consciousness, often bringing more anxiety than enlightenment.

This information glut coincides with our increasing over-reliance on devices to maintain constant awareness of whatever is going on in ourworld. What are our friends up to on their vacation? What’s happening in the stock market? How do the presidential polls look today? Is there any gossip about my favorite celebrity?

Surely these questions are worth some attention. Yet a growing number of us may be giving them more attention than needed. We’re known as “constant checkers”—checking our email, text and social media accounts almost constantly, perhaps from “fear of missing out” or as a respite from the drumbeat of sobering news stories that weigh on us every day.

Can religion offer a remedy for Information Overload? By coming together this morning, in person or online, each of us has made a choice to set aside stimuli that yield information in order to tap into a conversation that might yield meaning. We’ve chosen to spend an hour celebrating the power and wisdom of a transcendent presence--one that offers meaning and purpose that may be missing in other parts of our lives.

This searching presents both an opportunity and a challenge for our twenty-first-century church. Are we dispensing information, that we could otherwise find elsewhere**,** or are we helping one another to discover meaning? Religion writer Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "In an age of information overload ... the last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those… who have run frighteningly low on the Bread of Life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more about God. More God."1

These words strike a chord in me this summer as our calendar of Bible readings assigns four Sundays in a row to reflect on Jesus’ declaration “I am the bread of life.” His fame is spreading after he turns a few loaves and fish into a feast for multitudes. He wants his disciples and the crowds to focus not on the literal bread that temporarily satisfies physical hunger, but on spiritual sustenance to feed them with God’s love for a lifetime. The bread miracle gives them information about God and what God provides. Belief in Jesus offers them God—a way to experience and know God in their lives.

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In John’s gospel, the feeding miracle reveals Jesus as the channeler of God’s power. In today’s terms we might say reports about Jesus are “going viral.” As the growing crowd follows him, seeking more literal bread, and wanting more information about who he is, Jesus tries to redirect their attention to the new relationship with God that he will give them. He says “do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life” (John 6: 27).

Teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus continues in today’s text: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven… whoever comes to me will never be hungry” (John 6: 35, 41). What an audacious claim to make! Can you imagine turning on your phone and seeing the headline: “Jesus claims heavenly origin and promises unlimited bread”? Who wouldn’t struggle to comprehend what Jesus really means?

Some in the crowd may actually be hungry and are encouraged when they hear about this new supply of bread. Others who are skeptics, offended that Jesus says he comes from heaven, rush to dismiss him. This isn’t God’s Son, they complain, it is Jesus, “whose father and mother we know” (6: 42). He comes from Nazareth, not heaven. The idea of him entering us as God’s eternal food is beyond their view of reality. It baffles his disciples as well, and may even be a stretch for us to accept today.

Four Sundays devoted to this challenging symbolism could indeed begin to feel like information overload. The headline is provocative, but what does it mean? Fortunately, Jesus asks us not to search our minds for its logic, but to open our hearts to discern its meaning.

And that meaning, I believe, is an invitation to what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the practice of incarnation.” It’s the part of the story where we come in. In Jesus’ time and place, the gap between the hungry many and the well-fed few is even wider than today, when food insecurity threatens much of the world including many of our neighbors. For the poor in Jesus’ time, finding food could be a daily source of stress.

Jesus knows this, and he also knows the people are hungry for more than actual food. They pay attention to his teachings because he uses metaphors they can relate to and blends spiritual insights with compassionate physical acts. His ministry is transformative not because he personally can mend all of the wounds of the world, but because he calls us to follow him in the practice of incarnation.

Taylor suggests that when Jesus came into the world to embody or incarnate God as the Word Made Flesh, he did not come to do it once and for all “but to show any who were willing how God’s word might become flesh in their own lives too…” He taught his followers “to see God in the world in the same way he did” so they could learn about God’s realm by attending to their own and others’ physical lives on earth. 2

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Today Jesus gives our lives meaning and purpose as we touch people with God’s love and justice-- helping to bring about the abundant life that Jesus has come to proclaim (10:10).

Let’s notice a telling detail about the feeding miracle. The story appears in all four gospels and in all four, Jesus first turns to the disciples to find food for the crowd. In John’s gospel, he turns to Philip asking “where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (6: 5). Mark, Matthew and Luke record Jesus as being even more explicit; he orders the disciples: “you give them something to eat!” (Mk 6: 37, Matt. 14: 16, Lk 9:13).

No matter how we understand the nature of Jesus’ miracle, it serves as an indispensable teachable moment for his disciples about the practice of incarnation. The disciples identify the seemingly meager supply of food that is on hand; the disciples organize the people to sit down on the grass; the disciples witness the scene of thousands feasting together at this table spread by God; and the disciples gather up the leftovers so more food can be shared. They are beginning to learn what Jesus so fervently wants us to know—that whatever resources we might bring in response to the brokenness in our midst, God can multiply it.

Like the hungry crowds who follow Jesus, we’ve all known what it is like to run low on the bread of life and to yearn for more God in our bodies—tangible evidence that God has something new to show us: hope when all we feel is discouragement; possibility when all we see are limitations; a sense of belongingwhen all we’ve known is isolation or shame.

When I think of times in my life when I’ve rediscovered hope, possibility and belonging, I’ve felt this replenishing as a stirring of God’s Spirit in my body. I’ve shared here in the past about my experience in the 1990s of coming out as a gay man—a long and lonely journey-- and feeling Jesus lifting a crushing weight off my shoulders. Looking around, I’ve been grateful for the presence of friends and strangers—angels-- whose words or actions made God’s love visible to me in a new way.

Like Jesus’ disciples on the hillside, we are called to participate in building the world God wants us to make for one another. We can touch others with God’s transformative presence and channel the power of God’s hospitality to bring people together. To name just a few examples: God is present in our companioning of refugee families who are making a fresh start in a new country; God is present in the warmth and friendship that enlivens our Water Ministry community; God is present when adults and youth engage in miracles that help families repair or rebuild their homes; God is present in the safe spaces we offer, such as our Sacred Ground circles in which we come together to confront difficult questions as people striving to live God’s love.

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Like Jesus’ friends, we can engage with those around us to learn who is feeling depleted—running low on bread, or love or purpose-- and look for ways in which this community might replenish their supply.

And, most of all, we’re called to gather up and be grateful for the abundant and surprising gifts that God has lavished on each of us— energy, compassion, commitment, readiness, patience, tenderness, open-heartedness, joy—knowing that whatever we do with them, God will multiply them.

Let us share these gifts with fellow children of God who don’t need more information about God but are ready to take God in, and to experience with us the food that endures for eternal life.

Amen.

\*Works cited:

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 45

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Practicing Incarnation,” *The Christian Century*, April 5, 2005, p. 39