

Soul Food-On Not Being a Keto Christian—John 6: 26b-35
(August 4, 2024-11th Sunday after Pentecost)

Do you like bread? I love bread, in all its forms—farmer’s bread, sourdough, rye, pita, naan, rye, egg bread, focaccia, croissants. You name it, I love it. So, how sad it was for me when a few years ago, when as someone who struggles with their weight, I come across the only weight loss strategy that’s ever worked for me: Keto. Keto, the high protein, no carbohydrate diet. Unfortunately, COVID sabotaged keto for me, but it worked, and many people swear by it.

Keto might be a way toward better physical well-being but when it comes to Christianity, it’s a dead end.¹ “I am the bread of life”, John has Jesus say. You don’t want to be a keto Christian. A keto Christian won’t eat the bread of life and the result is a faith that only nominally nourishes, that doesn’t sustain us when life demands real sustenance. The keto Christian having foresworn the bread of life, settles for Jesus as a king, a provider or an instructor.

These are the approaches to faith that confront Jesus in John’s faith story. In my introduction to the scripture this morning I note how Jesus has escaped the crowd after the feeding of the five thousand miracle because they want to make him king. Jesus wants no part of that. Jesus as king, or perhaps more fittingly, Jesus as a royal mascot, we see a lot of that don’t we? Especially as it relates to the interplay between evangelical Christianity and politics. Jesus as king, the royal mascot who legitimates our lust for power, our greed, our crusades to protect privilege. We also see it in the United Church. It’s this kind of power and privilege relationship to Jesus as king that at least in part is responsible for the legacy of residential schools. Even though Jesus repudiates this way of being in our lives, not only in the lead up to today’s faith story but also as one of the temptations presented to him by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus doesn’t want to be our king; “I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry.”

Keto Christianity also tries to relate to Jesus as provider as Jesus says points out in saying the crowd only followed him because he gave them bread. There is spiritual truth in this approach. Gratitude for the gifts and blessings of life is a solid foundational piece in the life of faith. But we need to be careful about having faith hinge on being blessed according to the standards of the world—faith as long as we have health, wealth and success. In other words, blessings as proof of God’s favour. This is the explicit theology and relationship with Jesus espoused by the celebrity pastor purveyors of the prosperity gospel—Jesus not as the bread of life but Amazon Prime; the next day deliverer of the fruits of a nutrient deprived faith. Even though Jesus says it is the meek, the poor in spirit, those who mourn who are blessed. Jesus doesn’t want to just be our provider; “I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry.”

Keto Christianity Tries to relate to Jesus as instructor, as the crowd does in asking Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” You see this approach a lot in liberal

¹ Thanks to my friend, Rev. Heather Power for this analogy.

Christian Churches such as the United Church. Jesus as the ethicist who tells us how to be good, how to be just— “tell me what the right causes, the right social and political stances are Jesus and leave the rest up to me.” But Jesus says to the rich young man, who claims he has followed all the rules and done all the right things, that he lacks one thing, to sell all he has and follow him. Jesus doesn’t just want to be our instructor; “I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry.”

Keto Christianity is a hungry, unsatisfying, non-sustaining approach to faith that will not see us through life’s complexity. Jesus as king is a hollow faith that undercuts the very essence of the person of Jesus, born a poor, refugee baby under the yoke of empire. Jesus who rejected earthly power and empowered the marginalized. Jesus as king sets us up for a religion of insiders and outsiders where power is wielded not to empower but to defend and obtain power.

Jesus, solely as provider is neither nourishing nor enduring—when you go broke, when you get cancer, amid family strife. All you can conclude is that Jesus as provider is not living up to his job description—Jesus has abandoned you.

Jesus, solely as instructor will quickly starve of us of the nourishment we need for faith. Activism and causes without being rooted in a deep spiritual relationship, has difficulty sustaining itself because it becomes a burden of shoulds, oughts and guilt built around rules and obligations. Jesus becomes a task master who neither nourishes nor sustains.²

The payoff of keto Christianity is the ways in which it makes us feel powerful and in control. Jesus as the fuel for our own agendas of power, triumph, success and virtue. If we live a keto Christianity and are honest with ourselves, we know how empty it all is, how spiritually malnourished it leaves us, how hungry we are for something sustaining and enduring. Keto Christianity will not sustain us in the face of life’s disappointments, heartaches, tragedies and pain. When that happens, we feel abandoned. If it goes on for a long enough there’s term for it; the dark night of the soul. A state that begins in numbness and leads to utter despair, brought on by a feeling of spiritual abandonment.

But, if we can stay in that place, in faith that even if we can’t see Jesus and can’t feel God, that is simply a sign that we are not where the Holy One is, not that the Holy One doesn’t care or doesn’t exist. If we can stay in that place, then we might be ready to eat of the bread of life. Because there is no denying our powerlessness. In powerlessness we empty ourselves of ego and make room for God to flourish in us. Put another way, we develop an appetite for the bread of life, for a deeper relationship. A faith based not on keeping Jesus at a distance as king, provider and instructor but as the bread of life, taken into our very being. A faith which is not dependent on proving ourselves, attaining status, being successful or virtuous, but only on trust in the One who gives us the bread that gives life to the world.

² William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary-Pentecost 11*
<https://billloader.com/MkPentecost11Ord18.html>

If you're not sure whether your faith is based on this kind of trust or you're simply wondering, "well, how do I do that?", I invite you in the coming week, as you're faced with decisions big and small, to ask yourself a simple question, "what does love look like in this situation?" Whether it's a relationship question, a purchasing question, a work question, any question, "what does love look like here?". It's the question which lies at the heart of faith as proclaimed by Jesus, inviting us to surrender ego and fear and enter into relationship with Jesus as the bread of life amid our daily living. The Christian call is to let Jesus be the bread that nourishes our lives. Carb it up, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life". May we eat with joy and anticipation of grace. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar