

## *The Bread of Life* – John 6:24-35

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We're halfway through the Summer Olympics in Paris. The first week has showcased some incredible athletic performances. For me, the one that stands out the most has been that of the young man Stephen Nedoroscik, who swept in like Clark Kent to help the men's gymnastics team win bronze in the team competition.

Nedoroscik is a specialist—he only competes on the pommel horse. And he's simply incredible on the pommel horse. He's a self-described nerdy science kid, who's also a master at the Rubik's cube. And when the team needed him, he transformed himself into Super Man and showed up big time in the pommel horse—helping the Americans to their first team medal in sixteen years.

The Olympics provide so many other good-hearted stories over its two-week run. We look forward to the last week of competition that will no doubt provide more entertaining and uplifting moments.

For some viewers, however, their Olympic viewing stopped at the conclusion of the opening ceremony a week ago. There was a moment during the ceremony when, evidently, some say a parody of the Lord's Supper was enacted. Others contend that it wasn't related to the Lord's Supper at all.

The scene, a fashion show involving dancers, drag queens and a DJ, featured camera shots that reminded some viewers of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," which depicts the last meal of Jesus Christ before his crucifixion.

It was offensive enough to some to cause them, people of Christian faith most notably, to turn off the Olympics going forward.

I've wondered this week about that protest. And if the offense warranted such a reaction.

On one hand, the athletes competing had nothing to do with the opening ceremony and those who planned it and carried it out. We shouldn't punish the athletes for the alleged mistakes of others.

And in the same vein, and as I expressed online mid-week this week, this protest somewhat plays into the culture of grievance that seems to be sweeping the world. We disagree with something or someone, and we immediately feel we must do something to punish the offender. Whether it be a political party, a spouse, or an employer, or the International Olympic Committee, we're quick these days to profess and hold on to our outrage.

On the other hand, people do get upset when it appears one of the most central events that highlights one of the most fundamental doctrines of our Christian faith is poked fun at.

In Jesus saying to his disciples at his last supper with them, "Take and eat this bread. This is my body broken for you. Do it in remembrance of me," he was doing more than one thing. He was feeding them, their bodies certainly. Yet, the meal went far beyond a simple meal. He was promising them spiritual nourishment that would endure. And of course, he was foreshadowing the breaking of his own body and spilling of his own blood on a cross as an act of sacrifice and commitment that would change everything when it came to divine love.

And so making fun of the Last Supper (as many who were offended contend was the case) strikes at the heart of who we are as Christians and what we believe about Jesus. And that doesn't feel good.

Jesus is the bread of life, he said, that sustains. In him, we will never be hungry. And so when we break the bread as part of the Lord's Supper, as we will do today, we are receiving a spiritual gift that reflects the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit, rooted in the love and sacrifice of Jesus.

Being sustained by the Bread of Life happens in two parts: First, Jesus offers it. And second, we receive it.

The act of Jesus first offering himself to us as the bread of life happens over and over again. And it's so crucial that Jesus chose to make his case to his disciples at his Last Supper with them and on this occasion in John 6 when he tells them that he is the food that endures.

Again and again, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, Christ offers us the bread of life. In the bread we break and the cup we bless, he is offering us eternal nourishment.

Hearing that, in a worded description, may be useful and interesting. But, when we see it with our own eyes and when we act on it, it becomes all the more powerful.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *An Altar in the World*, writes, "In an age of information overload, when a vast variety of media delivers news faster than most of us can digest -- when many of us have at least two e-mail addresses, two telephone numbers -- the last thing any of us need is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, 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.”

Jesus knew how to offer the food of life that would endure—in the sacred act of eating. Heavy dialogue and churchy words grow stale. To see him as the bread of life, to touch the bread, to eat the bread—this is what endures, and this is what is lasting.

He offers this sustenance to us—and not only from this table once a month or on special days during the holy seasons of Christmas and Easter. He offers the food that endures through his constant presence and his reaching out to us in the people and events of our daily lives. It is through them that we also are reassured that what he has for us will not perish.

Again and again, he provides the bread of life. And again and again, we have opportunities to receive it.

Mother Teresa said: “In each of our lives Jesus comes as the bread of life — to be eaten, to be consumed by us. This is how he loves us.”

After he offers himself to us, we have the opportunity to receive him.

As we all know accepting a gift is something most of us are uncomfortable with. We believe there’s something we should do to earn that gift. In the end, though, the bread of life is not something we can work for. It’s not a gift we can earn. It’s born only out of the love and grace of a merciful God.

Frederick Buechner describes it this way: “The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you. I created the universes. I love you. There's only

one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.” --Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper&Row, 1973), 33-34.

Here’s the thing about accepting the gifts that God gives: we don’t have to take them. Christ doesn’t force himself on us. The gift is presented, and an invitation is made. Yet, Christ doesn’t force it, and neither should we force it on somebody else.

Maybe that’s why the bread of life isn’t enjoyed by more people: people feel it’s being forced upon them in a way that makes them feel that they have no choice. And just like at a restaurant where there are multiple meal options, it’s up to us to decide what we choose for ourselves. When we’re forced to eat something we don’t want, the results are never good. And too many times, a meal forced upon us is one we never enjoy.

This is, in and of itself, a problem the church has. In our quest to grow and be relevant and feel good about ourselves, we cajole, harangue, and almost force others to receive what we believe is so good for us but something that somebody else isn’t ready to receive.

When my mother forced me to eat Brussel sprouts as a kid, it robbed me of ever having the palate for them.

The bread of life is appetizing only when we’re ready to receive it. Christ offers it, and by extension, we offer it on his behalf. Only each of us can decide if we want it.

That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make the case for its value. It is life-changing and life-giving—if only we’ll try it.

As a church sign in Indiana once read, “If you don't feel strong enough, maybe you're not eating the right kind of bread.

Try the Bread of Life." One might say there's no better angel food in existence.

Incidentally, decades later, I now enjoy Brussel sprouts—especially when they're grilled. Finally, I was ready to eat what was offered me, and they're now delicious.

At the right time, the bread of life appeals. We're ready to receive it. It nourishes in a way nothing else can. And Jesus is always offering.

The crowd gathered around Jesus in John 6 declared, "Sir, give us this bread always."

They were ready and they would not be hungry again.