



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

# *The Bread of Life*

## January 23, 2019

### **Text: Deuteronomy 24: 19-22**

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I am commanding you to do this.

### **Text: Luke 24: 28-35**

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us\* while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



### **Sermon:**

Without question we are a society that is food-oriented. We have so many ways to connect we food. We watch cooking shows on television (that’s usually what Lisanne is watching late at night); there’s food on television, food on podcasts, and discussions of any food we like at any time of day. We have our favorite recipes, our favorite restaurants our favorite supermarkets, and our favorite food brands. Some of us orient our lives so intensely around specialized foods that they have a special name for it—they call it *foodies*—people who really relish creative cuisine.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who also love food but who are not ever sure where they might get their next meal. They too have favorite recipes, favorite foods; they probably have favorite supermarkets and they enjoy creative cuisine, but they remain hungry most of the time. The power and economic disparities of our society limit their choices and their resources. These are people who are considered food-insecure. Now I imagine that, like me, you might somewhere in the middle—neither a foodie but also not food-insecure. I don't worry about having food, but I also don't worry about what particular food I do have. The biggest food-related problem that I have is that I have no imagination and no skill when it comes to cooking. What takes my daughter ten to fifteen minutes to prepare takes me at least an hour, and I'll still burn it somewhere along the way. You may think it's just a preacher's joke, but it's not. My family will tell you. I'm fortunate enough to know that food is readily available to me, and while my choices about how to prepare it are so unimportant, I do think that the choices I make about where I get my food and who I eat it with are critical.

There is a bakery that I'm quite fond of on the premises of Gould Farm. The Harvest Barn Bakery makes some of the best pastries and cookies and bread in Berkshire County. It also provides work readiness, work experiences, life skills, and psychiatric rehabilitation to support people who are in recovery and learning to live with mental illness. I remember one of the first times I visited the bakery. I arrived on a day when they were baking bread. The guests and staff were busy mixing ingredients, kneading, shaping, proofing and baking—I had to check all those terms because I had no idea what they meant—but that's what they were doing. After they had finished, they sliced and packaged the bread to share with the community. Each day at Gould Farm and Saturdays and Sundays as well, we enjoy the fruits of their labor; they make bread for all of us. Whether enjoying Gould Farm Maple White or Maple Wheat, Multi-grain or Sourdough (wow, it sounds like a commercial), we know that this bread is a lifeline. It is a lifeline for the people in need. It's a sign of potential, of capability and the value of recovery. It is the sign of promise. It is the taste of competence, a job well done, and it is a gift we share with others. That gift demonstrates our interdependence as a community. This is bread, but it is also life.

It's interesting to note that in every one of the stories of Jesus feeding others, the most common food item that Jesus provided was bread. It's not so surprising when you realize that the Hebrew word for bread—*lechem*—means food in general and thus life itself. In the old world, bread and life were inextricably intertwined. Bread and grain are also used in the Bible to teach us about or responsibility to each other. In Deuteronomy 24, which you just heard, the people were told not to harvest the corners of the field but to leave them for the hungry that will pass by. They were to share some of their bounty as a tithe—a portion of their grain, wine and oil with the firstlings of their herd would be set aside to take to the temple to eat in thanksgiving to God. Then in the third year of the harvest, the same tithe was set aside for neighbors in need. On the seventh year of the harvest, all loans and outstanding debts were to be forgiven; if only we lived in that time now. As such, bread became a tool for justice and a social safety net. Bread teaches us that we must feed each other or some of us will die. Whether as manna from heaven, as daily bread or as the bread of affliction, images of bread in the Bible have always served to remind us that the Holy One not only blesses us with food to eat but feeds and comforts us with spiritual food as well. Over and over again, bread is used to point away from itself and to the good creation of God and on one another. Through the

struggles of life and faith, we learn to rely on God, who is the bread that sustains us and the ground of our very being.

But not everyone can entertain such full awareness of God’s spiritual sustenance because of the very real gnawing ache of hunger that distracts them. While the great recession of 2008 is far behind us, the ranks of the hungry continue to grow. When we think of the numbers of people who are in need of assistance, the picture of what Jesus and the disciples did up on that hilltop in feeding the five thousand comes into very clear focus. Although we didn’t read that story today, I think you probably remember it. There were thousands of folks showing up to hear Jesus teach. They were looking for help and healing and for hope. Just imagine the lines. Imagine the anxiety. How would the disciples be able to feed all these people? On the mountainside Jesus asked Phillip, “Where shall we buy food? Where shall we buy bread to feed this crowd?” Phillip went into an anxiety tailspin. Then Andrew said, “There’s a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish—and that’s not enough!” In her book, *Take This Bread*, writer Sarah Miles insists that the whole point of the Christian faith is transformation of those systems that fail those who are most in need. She says that Christianity proclaims against reason—that the hungry will be fed and that those cast down will be raised up. Jesus offers food without exception to the unworthy or the worthy, the screwed up or the pious, and then, as she says, he commands everyone to do the same.

Many churches live out this vision and call to feed the hungry through regular participation in community dinners, soup kitchens, food pantries, food drives and other support services. We know of those churches and many of us participate in those church activities. In these economic times with high food insecurity; however, we’re discovering the limits of our charitable actions. We must think about the bigger picture and why so many people do not have enough food to eat. Today one in ten adult residents in Berkshire County is food insecure. And one in seven children is as well. That means they do not know where their next meal will come from or they skip meals or cut back on the quality or quantity of food in order to survive. Berkshire County ranks among the top three counties with the highest rate of food insecurity in the state of Massachusetts. Our county.

When I served as an Associate Pastor in a reform church in central New Jersey, I had a chance to observe one congregation’s project—an attempt to respond to this problem. They collaborated with a local feeding program; this congregation joined with a non-profit organization to create what they called a *Better World Café*. The non-profit staffed the café with students in their culinary school, which provided job training to those individuals who were homeless or on welfare, and the church provided space for the people to come and eat in a restaurant-style setting. The menu was simple and made from locally sourced, healthy ingredients, and it was a “pay what you can” arrangement,” which was new to me. So many people like myself paid full price for their meals. Others who did not have the means either paid what they could or volunteered to wipe down tables, wash dishes, or assist in whatever was needed. It was a new model for giving a space where all people could eat together, regardless of income—where people could afford good food no matter what income they had. Besides being a place to eat, the Better World Café was also a place to experience community, to be welcomed with open arms, and wide smiles

My office happened to be across the hall from the café, so given my insufficient culinary skill, I ate there often. There was bread along with salads, soups, and an array of sandwiches to eat, but patrons feasted also on spiritual food. They were part of a community that shared the vision for a world without hunger, based on mutual respect, dignity—many faiths but part of one body. Jesus, the bread of life, was present in that small church café, and his love flowed in and through each morsel lovingly prepared and eagerly devoured. In Latin, the term for *companion* refers to bread. “**Com**” means with, and **panas** means bread. The person with whom I break my bread can be called my companion. From this concept we gain new insight into the phrase, “He was known in the breaking of the bread.” I believe that God is revealed not only in the bread and wine at Communion but whenever we share food with others—particularly strangers. I believe that the fruits of the earth are for everyone, without exception. I believe that we can find strength, sustenance, and companionship if we join together—as many members of one body with open hearts and open minds. Then miracles will happen. People will be fed. We will be fed because it is in and through these acts of compassion, companionship and justice that we encounter the risen Christ. Through our sharing the world will know the power of God’s love—through Jesus Christ, who is the bread the life.

Amen.



*The Rev. Patty Fox, Pastor*