

BREAD OF LIFE – CALLED TO CARE Knox Met Regina – August 8, 2021

John 6:35, 41–51

There are churches named Bread of Life. It is such an expressive and meaningful title that there are Bread of Life Hospitals, Care Homes, Hospices, and charities offering a variety of services around the globe. Bread of Life has a biblical origin; and though it dates back centuries, it still has an appeal today. Sometimes the sentiment with which these organizations function and the way people perceive them might be noble and well-intentioned, but may reflect a charity approach rather than a human rights approach. This issue immediately reveals that Bread of Life may not lend itself to a comprehensive sense of Care. Let me set beside this issue, the way the United Church of Canada defines the 3 roles of a Minister, namely Minister of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care. It names Pastoral Care as one special responsibility, which was not really absent in earlier thinking but didn't receive the attention it now does. Pastoral Care, we might identify, as the place where the rubber hits the road. And since all members of the church jointly own this calling, what pastoral care involves needs revisiting from time to time. Pastoral Care or Care in general touches a person deeply and demands a wholesome response.

And this I want to address this morning with the theme "Care to Care" based on the statement Jesus makes or is conferred upon him in the reading from Mark "I am the Bread of Life". Caring to explore what care is calls us to take a step back before engaging in any act of care. Taking a step back helps us to see what care is in terms of a bigger picture, if you will. Usually taking a step back is done with the purpose to present the facts right, in the right sequence, so that the full picture would emerge. But the stepping back that I am suggesting is not so much about moving backwards on the same linear chronological plane. Rather it is about going deeper, addressing something foundational. It is reaching the space within us where reason, imagination, feeling are not so rigid but move freely. It is a place of self-awareness, it is a soul function. In this space the ego is not in control; it is harmless. The ego is present and is open to numerous ways of being, open to numerous possibilities. And this is the place where Jesus can utter "I am the bread of life" in a dynamic way, in a self-sacrificial way - not a self-promoting way. Biblical scholars like John Shelby Spong suggest that Jesus didn't go about Judea saying "I am the Bread of Life", "I am the Resurrection and Life", or "I am the Way the Truth and the Life". John's gospel was written about 40 years after the event, and not with contemporaneous notes. So, these scholars see those as conferred titles on Jesus as people experienced how Jesus helped them in their spiritual awakening and faith journey. I definitely see their interpretation helpful, and note that in this case it from the **perspective of**

the witness. However, I would suggest taking a further step back, and view it from the **perspective of the experiencer**, from Jesus' own experience. This stepping back takes Jesus to the question "Who I am", the state of awareness or the soul moment. This is the moment of encountering the Care to Care call. Jesus as an experiencer of the soul coming alive – and the soul as a place of nourishing is critical the Good News emerging from this biblical text. The "I AM" sayings of Jesus should therefore be seen first as what Jesus experienced as renewal and empowerment. Then when Jesus is engaged in public ministry the people see it, they confer the special titles to Jesus.

The 'Jesus way' is not about selling an ideal. It involves a practice, a process. The spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hahn gives the warning "To love without knowing how to love wounds the person we love" in his book "How to Love". Care and Love are inter-woven concepts and actions that refer to how we initiate or respond such that the good of those in the relationship are front and centre. So, for the result of love or care to be helpful and not hurtful, one needs to take a step back and consider what within us is touched and enabled, and how a good part of me is to be shared for the benefit of the other. Without experiencing the Care to Care state of awareness and dedication, launching into acts of care randomly can cause burnout sooner or later. And the acts of caring may neither be fulfilling nor helpful to the party at the other end.

Jesus often took the time to go to the mountains to pray, to be with God. This was not the time to be possessed with his own thoughts and rehearse how he would impact people's thinking. The time on the mountains was for him to be somehow caught by the truth and be shaped by it. This is the time of **so fully developing a passion** and the creativity to articulate truth and care deeply in the situations one is part of. It is not different from how great artists and music composers have borne humble testimony that they were themselves surprised by their best pieces. They have testified that they were seeing something or that they were hearing and kept hearing something that they simply poured out what just kept coming. They couldn't take too much credit as the authors of the art works or music.

When Jesus took retreats from the routines, he didn't fully retreat from the world or the care that the world needed. In fact how to truly Care about Care, or Care about caring for the world took hold of Jesus. There are many biblical expressions about this: being full of the Spirit, or the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, or Seeing visions, and so on. This is not unlike artists and musicians experiencing their hands becoming channels for art and music to flow

through. When this process is operational, there is no ego or attitude of dominance in what we do. There is no hurt when we show love or care to another person.

How exactly does the process of taking a retreat work? How do I attain the state of Care to Care”? Contemporary spiritual writer Joan Chittister presents the question of a seeker who asks an elder: “How does one seek union with God?” The elder answers: “The harder you seek, the more distance you create between God and you.” Quite perplexed, the seeker queries: “So what does one do about the distance?” The elder answers: “Understand that it isn’t there.” The seeker pursues his line of questioning: “Does that mean that God and I are one?” The elder answers calmly: “Not one, not two”. The seeker cries out in dismay: “But how is that possible?” And the elder answers pointing out: “The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and the song—not one, not two.” And that is the mystery aspect of spirituality. Seeking God, or taking a step back are always met by the ever attendant grace of God. Taking a step back or going on a retreat is only a physical way of speaking, and surely Covid 19 has made us all tired and sick of hearing physical distancing and social distancing. I don’t really like to use the virus even as a tool or analogy to explain the ever-active presence of God. But given our pandemic situation, and how universally the contagious nature of a virus has been recognized, I have put it out there, though hesitantly. Perhaps a better way of expressing God’s immediate presence can be gleaned from some Indian religious thinking, which is based on a collectivist framework. They understand the soul in dynamic terms. The person doesn’t have a soul residing in them – the soul is not someone’s possession. The soul doesn’t belong to a body even temporarily. The soul manifests as some insight, as some perfect principle, or as some need or crisis that demands attention. The soul is regarded as organic in nature. This is certainly very attractive, but it also shows one critical defect as is the case with all collectivist thought. The initiative element is missing. People might have the tendency to wait for reality to heal itself, re-calibrate itself with the all-powerful soul freely moving where it will. Hence, it is important for us to recognize the role of the individual. The individual has to be moved by the Care to Care principle or bug.

And Jesus offers the Bread of Life as something lasting. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Jesus knows about the people of Israel having been fed manna in the desert every day. Even in a place of scarcity, there was provision. With the concept Bread of Life, Jesus is addressing both physical food and Spiritual food at once. This 6th chapter of John begins with the 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish

story. And what I learn from that story is that the miracle is not really the multiplication of the loaves of bread and fish. Rather there are two miracles if you will call them that – the first is the **miracle of Jesus seeing** the people as needing to be fed, which sentiment and response is unusual. When we see a crowd, feeding them doesn't strike us as an idea to be entertained. But Jesus sees them as People of God who need spiritual food as well as food for the body. The More Voices hymn "Bread of life, feed my soul" captures this truth. The bread Jesus gives feeds the soul. Then in the chorus, the lines "Come, my friend, and share in the feast that is laid out for you, To show how much I care" certainly has reference to the food that nourishes the body. And the second miracle aspect of the 5 loaves 2 fish story is that of the **miracle of distribution**. There is always food there or around or hoarded which needs to be freed and shared. The UN says that there is enough food grown to feed the world, but the distribution policies are not in place. I like the way the Medical Authority of Sri Lanka used the acronym GDP some months before Covid struck the world. They used GDP to suggest Good Distribution Practice. Quite a timely preparedness to face a pandemic about to hit with good distribution strategy. Jesus showed the disciples and the people what is possible with what you have when there is willingness to share, readiness to distribute.

And Jesus also knew the prophet Isaiah's words: Anyone who thirsts, come to the waters; You who have no money, come buy and eat; Anyone who thirsts, come to the waters; You who have no money, come buy and eat; Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. This again leads Jesus find the Care to Care principle already in the Hebrew prophetic tradition to bring forth to people's consciousness through a demonstrative act – which we traditionally call the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

Finally, let me end by pointing out how the practice of Communion as a sacrament highlights an additional aspect of the Care to Care call. On the day before Jesus was arrested, he appreciated the companionship of the disciples in his life and ministry. The etymology of '**Companion**' is connected to the French "Com" which means "with" and "Panis" which means "bread". So companions are **people with whom we break bread**. Breaking bread in the early church was a daily practice, and people became companions in their spiritual journey and in breaking bread together. The two are connected. Soul-making and bread sharing go together. May Soul making "Care to Care" efforts and actual acts of caring continue to take us forward in our faith journey, and may it be contagious.

Thanks be to God.