

# Marjory Zoet Bankson: Being Bread

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

by Marjory Zoet Bankson

## Being Bread

### Gospel Reading: John 6:24-35

*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life...Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus and the disciples feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. "They ate and were satisfied," John tells us, implying that their satisfaction came from something more than physical food. Now Jesus makes that explicit. **Do not work for food that perishes**, Jesus says, **but for the food that endures for eternal life**. That is the food that truly satisfies. However, what is that food? Moreover, how do we find it?

We know what perishable food is because it goes bad in the refrigerator. We live in such a land of plenty that most of us worry more about eating and drinking too much rather than feeling the ache of hunger as a driving force, but that does not stop us from wanting even more – more choices, more comfort, more ease, more satisfaction. As a metaphor, perishable food is that which can be caught, and counted, and kept. In the Hebrew scripture for today, King David fell into the trap of thinking that his position gave him the right to

take what he wanted and keep it for himself. He chose perishable food instead of God's abundant blessing.

The imperishable or eternal realm seems oddly ephemeral, intangible and yet it is very real and ordinary. It is often relational, visible in our interactions rather than something we carry alone. King David might have honored Bathsheba's beauty and let his attraction make him more aware of women without killing her husband and taking her to his bed. Letting the impulse to conquer and keep something for ourselves be turned into conscious behavior that benefits others is the essence of "being bread" as Jesus was. That kind of spiritual food makes us more conscious, compassionate and aware.

Keeping my ears open for Jesus' call to that imperishable realm is one of the reasons why I come to church each week. It is also one of the reasons I joined the [Faith@Work](#) pilgrimage to Guatemala.

## **The Dump**

A powerful image of the struggle for both perishable and imperishable food was the city dump in Guatemala City, crawling with scavengers who were desperately looking for things to sell so they could buy food and drink each day. The dump was full of perishable goods! Moreover, death seemed as close as the cloud of vultures hanging over the seething mass of garbage and people there. There seemed to be nothing spiritual or eternal about that place.

Yet we participated in a remarkable mission right there in the dump, where children are fed and loved in the name of Jesus. The staff at The Potters House is committed to offering *the food that endures* along with a healthy meal each day. They believe in offering both even though they are being criticized by evangelical Protestants for not sharing more scripture or focusing more on conversion. Instead, the Potters House offers a reliable fabric of community for about 150 children and

their parents.

I was fed that “enduring food” by the trust of a first-grader who gave me a hug at the end of one of their songs...and then she snuggled in for a good squeeze. The teacher had said they could offer hugs to us, so the children fanned out into our group with their hugs and laughter, piling on like puppies...a bit like the “kid pile” we sometimes see here at Seekers for the children’s word. My guess is that we would **not** see that level of trust in a typical American school. Here we live with much more fear and caution, guarding our perishables I think.

## **I AMs**

In our reading for today, Jesus says, “**I am the bread of life.**” In fact, the Book of John contains seven of these mysterious “I am” sayings of Jesus. In other chapters, he says “**I am the light of the world...I am the door...I am the vine...I am the good shepherd...I am the resurrection...and I am the way, the truth and the life.**” These marvelous images give form and substance to the even more ancient revelation to Moses at the burning bush, when God said simply “I am that I am.” Jesus “fleshed out” the great I AM of God, lifting the downtrodden, loving the outcast, living fully into the face of death. In Jesus, we see the true nature of God. In addition, we catch sight of the eternal dimension of our mortal lives.

In Guatemala, I felt really close to Jesus. Maybe the simple poverty of rural life was so like the biblical setting. Maybe it was the political situation-so dangerous for the poor. Maybe it was seeing people who were literally “being bread” for others. I felt Jesus in the Potters House staff and in the lives of two different Catholic priests there. One was Fr. Greg Schaffer, who has just celebrated his 40th year of ministry in San Lucas Toliman, where Julie Arms’ parents go twice a year to offer medical treatment for parishioners there.

Fr. Greg was a young priest in New Ulm, Minnesota, when his bishop assigned him to San Lucas. As the guerilla movement among the Mayas began to cause trouble for the government in the 60s and 70s, Fr. Greg steered his congregation toward economic self-sufficiency and neutrality to keep the village from being occupied or destroyed. Today 57% of the people in San Lucas are under 20 years old; just 3% are over 60. 33% of the people in this district live in "extreme poverty." We went because Julie recommended an article on the internet about this remarkable community-which the guidebooks dismiss as "nothing special." It is not a tourist destination.

We arrived unannounced and Fr. Greg was elsewhere, presumably on parish business. A rock band was practicing in the church for their charismatic service the next day. His housekeeper invited us into his simple living quarters to use the bathroom and leave him a note. When somebody remarked about the beauty of her blouse, she got out weavings made by women of the parish and told us some of their stories. A primary source of income seems to be cultivating seedlings for reforestation-a major need in Guatemala. Moreover, this parish is quietly buying property for redistribution when it becomes available.

As we walked around the parish hall, I noticed a simple piece of paper stuck to the wall near a charcoal drawing of Archbishop Romero, the martyred Salvadoran prelate, which read:

*Seven Social Sins*

*Politics without principle*

*Wealth without work*

*Commerce without morality*

*Pleasure without conscience*

*Education without character*

*Science without humanity*

*Worship without sacrifice*

*It described the creed of Fr. Greg's parish.*

*I am the good shepherd, Jesus said.*

In another parish on Lake Atitlan, another American priest lived out his faith in Jesus to a different end. Henri Nouwen tells the story in his book, *Love in a Fearful Land*, which I found on my own bookshelf after our visit to Santiago last year. There Fr. Stan Lothar arrived as a new priest from Oklahoma in the early 80s. He invited his seminary friend, Henri Nouwen, to “come and pray with us” because the parish was beginning to suffer periodic sweeps by the military. Henri stayed for two weeks, deeply moved by his friend’s courage and worried about his future there. About a year later, a death squad arrived for Fr. Lothar, who fought their efforts to abduct him. He was killed in a small inner room of the church. His replacement, Fr. Joe Vessey, made that room a memorial before his life was threatened to the point that his bishop pulled him out of Santiago. Henri Nouwen published the story in 1985, while the military was still in control of Santiago. We saw a memorial on the wall of the church with more than a hundred crosses marking the dead and disappeared from that parish, but the church still seems vital.

*I am the way, the truth and the life, Jesus said.*

## **Resurrection**

An image from the countryside that sticks in my mind is the sight of a solitary stalk of corn, growing in the middle of a field of other crops. The Mayas see corn as a religious symbol of life and they never cut one of these volunteer stalks. It comes from a seed not planted by human hands. It stands like a living cross, graceful and green... a symbol of God’s bounty, God’s renewal and resurrection for all of life. For me, it was a constant reminder of Jesus as bread and yet I never took a picture of one of those stalks. It did not seem special enough, I guess.

Maybe that is the key to these mysterious “I am” statements of

Jesus. They are so ordinary! I am the bread...I am the vine...I am the door...I am light. Ordinary images speak of a timeless realm hidden, like kernels of corn, in the plowed fields of our common lives.

The simple list of Social Sins tacked to the wall in San Lucas Toliman has begun to take on new meaning for me as **Seven Signs of God:**

1. Politics with principle...I am the doorway to freedom
2. Wealth from work...I am the bread of life
3. Commerce with morality...I am the true vine of connection
4. Pleasure with conscience...I am the light of the world
5. Education with character...I am the good shepherd
6. Science with humanity...I am the resurrection
7. Worship with sacrifice...I am the way, the truth and the life

As we come to the table this morning, let us see the bread and wine as a sign of God's eternal presence here. We can set aside our worries about the perishable things and come, ready for the bread that will satisfy our spiritual longings.

Amen.