

## **Ego Eimi, Part 3: “I am the bread of life”**

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When you think of Christmas and baking, what comes to mind? Cookies, to be sure: sugar cookies, gingerbread men, frosted cookies with santa faces or other adornments, and those yummy peanut butter cookies with the Hershey’s kisses pressed into them. Of course there are Christmas breads, too. Cinnamon rolls, sticky buns, Italian panettone and German stollen, sour cream coffee cake ... and did you know that Le Quartier across the street sells a to-die-for chocolate cranberry brioche for Christmas feasting? More than all these baked goods, however, the one I associate most strongly with Christmas – and love so much I would trade all the rest just for this one thing – is traditional Norwegian lefse.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the finer pleasures of lefse, lefse is a flatbread made of potatoes, milk, butter, and cream. It’s rolled out like a large tortilla then fried on a griddle. Then you spread butter over it, sprinkle it with a generous dusting of sugar and cinnamon, and roll it up. What does lefse taste like you may wonder? Happiness, joy, and a little magic rolled up and consumed together!

Given my Scandinavian heritage, and my father’s near-fanaticism over celebrating Christmas with a giant Scandinavian meal, I have happily gorged on lefse literally every year of my life. If you take away every other Christmas food, take away even the Christmas decorations, the tree, and yes, even the gifts, Christmas could still feel like Christmas to me provided I had two things: Jesus ... and lefse.

Actually, there’s more of a connection between Jesus and lefse than Christmas alone. You see, when Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life in the Gospel of John, he claims that one who partakes of this bread will never be hungry again. He’s saying that this alone is all you need to satisfy you. It’s like he’s claiming to be the lefse for the human soul! (You don’t need anything else to be fulfilled.)

Obviously, Jesus is not talking about physical bread, but something spiritual. In fact, in the Gospel of John, it’s all spiritual. As we observed last week, the Jesus who speaks to us in the Gospel of John is not so much the Jesus of history as the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ, whom the early Christians also referred to as the Holy Spirit. John’s Gospel was written a full 70 years after Jesus’s death, so the person who produced the Gospel we call “John” (no author is attributed by name in the Gospel) was less concerned about writing about the Jesus who lived and died three-quarters of a century earlier, than he was speaking about the Resurrected Jesus whom his community continued to experience as the Holy Spirit. So if you want to understand what John’s community understood when they read “I am the Bread of Life. Whomever comes to me will never be hungry,” picture the Holy Spirit telling you this. The Holy Spirit is the bread of life – the spiritual lefse. Once you have eaten this Spirit bread, a deep, basic craving is satisfied – and you know where to readily find more of this food in the future.

The big question, then, is what is this Spirit bread and how do we eat it? How do we free this grand metaphor from unnecessary abstraction and point to something concrete enough that people know how to find it and what to do with it?

Incidentally, one of the blessings of the grand metaphors we are exploring in this series, like Bread of Life, or Good Shepherd, Gate, Vine, and so on, is that, as metaphors, they allow a wide variety of human experience to fit into them. There is no single experience, or interpretation of the metaphor that we can label “The Right One.” So there’s always room for you and me in the story of faith. We’re part of the diversity of this big, roomy metaphor.

I say this because I’m going to tell you quite concretely of what I believe is the key spiritual experience which is referred to as the Bread of Life that allows a person never to hunger again. Or at least, it is the key experience in my life.

Because this experience is so central in my life, those of you who have read Gifts of the Dark Wood or heard a sermon I preached years ago already know about it. Perhaps hearing my story again, alongside the metaphor of Bread of Life, you will see more clearly how this story relates not just to me and satisfying my hunger but to you and your hunger.

During my college years I worked summers in a salmon cannery in Dillingham, Alaska. It wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do with my time off, but Whitman College—a small, private liberal arts college in Walla Walla, Washington—was expensive, and I didn’t have the money to pay for college beyond my first year.

Salmon saved me. Each year as millions of sockeye and other salmon migrated to the icy waters of Bristol Bay, I migrated with them. I secured a job as a Quality Assurance inspector on the canning line at Peter Pan Seafoods. The hours were brutal when the salmon were running and life was challenging. Yet in just six or seven short weeks, which often felt like the longest weeks of my life, I could return to Whitman with a sizeable check in hand. Combined with money made from student work, it would cover me for the year. Life was good, or so I thought.

Following my Junior year of college – an important year for me because I finally stopped running away from my calling to be a minister and fully reconciled myself to the idea of attending seminary following college – I knew I had a significant challenge in front of me. In order to attend seminary I had to make it through my senior year of college – which first meant *paying* for it. Attending Whitman required that I provide a check for \$8,000 each year beyond the financial aid, student loans, and modest parental assistance I received. This particular summer, I was a little more anxious for a big salmon season than usual. My savings account had run completely dry by the time I walked off the plane in the remote, rough-and-tumble fishing town of Dillingham. I was looking forward to putting a fire hose up to my savings account, turning the spigot, and blasting it with streams of cool, green cash.

Such was not to happen. Apparently the salmon decided to go on vacation that year, or maybe someone told them we were waiting to greet them with nets, sharp knives, little tin cans, and hot ovens and they didn’t appreciate the hospitality. In any case, the cannery was

sending us home early. After four weeks of scrounging around for any odd job I could find, I had managed to accumulate just \$1,200.

As the date of my departure to the Lower 48 neared, I became more anxious and desperate as I struggled to reconcile my sense of call to ministry with the looming certainty that I couldn't afford to return for my final year of college. An internal storm was gathering on the horizon. The waves were getting choppy. My way forward appeared blocked by what felt like a hurricane heading straight for me. The hurricane felt particularly intense because I had experienced such a profound sense of call to the ministry – a call that I had finally accepted after trying to run from it for so many years. I had at last begun to trust the God who kept sending me warm and inviting signals that I should stop running and go to seminary. Now it felt like the rug was being pulled out from under me. I wondered if I could ever trust my feelings and intuitions again, or if I might be massively deluded. All I knew for sure was that I was lost. Lost and scared.

On walks along Dillingham's bluffs overlooking the gray waters of Bristol Bay, I would cry out to God, "I need a miracle! I need another seven grand, and school starts in just seven weeks! Is there a lottery ticket I can buy? Is there some long-lost, wealthy relative out there who'd take pity on me? Is there a horde of salmon arriving that no one has spotted?" My cries simply disappeared into the void, returning unanswered. No assurance. No visions. And, of course, no money.

Three days before my departure, I was standing out on the bluffs literally taking a breath from yelling at God for abandoning me in my final year of college, when a thought fluttered in and out of my mind almost before I could notice it. But I did notice. It said in essence, "You're asking me for the wrong thing. Don't ask for the money. Don't ask for a cheap trick to avoid defeat."

"Then what should I ask for?" I bellowed.

"Ask instead for assurance that I, whom you love so well, love you back, and that I will be there for you just as much in defeat as in victory."

My heart sank. I didn't want to even envision defeat. What would happen if that vision went out into the universe and was interpreted as advance acceptance of my doom? Or what if giving up on my dream would be interpreted as lack of confidence in God's goodness? I tried it anyway. What else could I do?

On my first half-hearted attempt, something unexpected drifted past my awareness: a whiff of peace. Nothing more than a faint whisper, but the first honest peace I'd felt in weeks. I became more sincere. Throughout the day I kept asking in various ways for the assurance that life would still be meaningful, and that God would still be there for me even if I could not afford to complete my college education. It took some time before I could truly feel it, and even longer to trust the feeling. When I finally did find it within me to tell God honestly that I desired God's presence in my life more than I wanted to finish college, an ocean of peace came rushing in that I have never forgotten. It washed over every anxiety, every fear, and every hurt I had so carefully held onto. It left me feeling like an immeasurable burden

had been lifted from my shoulders. I walked back to the cannery a completely different person.

No longer absorbed in worry, I felt a sense of spaciousness and ease that allowed me to look around, listen, and absorb my surroundings. At one point I overheard someone talking about an upcoming opening of a salmon season in Southwestern Alaska. This one typically started later than the Bristol Bay season. I hadn't been aware of it before since I was normally working feverishly in the Dillingham cannery at that time.

Doing quick research, I learned that a cannery in Petersburg, Alaska, was hiring. They wouldn't promise me a job, but I figured that if I spent half the money I'd earned in Dillingham on a plane ticket to Petersburg, I might just get lucky.

I had nothing to lose.

So I flew to Petersburg, turned in my application, and was hired the same day for a job on the cannery's Quality Assurance team. As fate, synchronicity, or just plain luck would have it, the salmon run in Southeastern Alaska turned out to be the largest in a century. For a solid month I worked from 6:30 a.m. until 1:30 or even 2:30 a.m. every day. The salmon nearly annihilated us! But at the end of the summer, I returned to Whitman College with \$9,600 in my bank account. I think I had dark rings under my eyes as I made out my \$8,000 check that fall but I'd never been so happy to pay.

I consider what happened that summer a miracle. Only the miracle wasn't finding the money, as some might conclude. While money made an enormous difference in finding my way back to school one year, the quiet assurance I received on those Dillingham Bluffs has become a defining moment in my life.

I prayed sincerely that what I wanted more than anything else on my path forward was God's presence. I believe that in making this prayer from the depths of my being I ate the Bread of Life referred to in the Gospel of John. The peace that washed over me when I had been so crazy scared about the future became my assurance that God would, in fact, be with me no matter where my path headed.

While I could not have known it at the time, my experience in Dillingham would continue to feed me on up to this day. For, while I cannot claim never to have been anxious about the future again once I ate that Bread – indeed, there have been many points when I could not see my way forward and my fears have overcome me. Yet, I have always known where to turn when the anxiety has returned. And I have always found my hunger satisfied, just as Jesus promises in the Gospel of John.

Enough about me. How about you? "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." What is your Bread of Life story? Have you ever had an experience that satisfied your soul's hunger and left you with knowledge of where the true food can be found?