

Better Ingredients – John 6:25-35

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So, Pappa John's Pizza. Who likes Pappa John's? Joey's a Dominoes guy. Some are still Pizza Hut people (it was the chain of my youth). There's a whole bunch of them now, including great local chains.

Pappa John's had a slogan a few years back. Maybe it's still theirs today: "Better Ingredients. Better pizza. Pappa John's." Now, none of their ingredients or those of their competitors are good for you when combined to make their products. But they sure taste good. And maybe there's truth in that Pappa John's' ingredients are a little higher quality than that of Dominoes and the like.

There is something to be said about using higher quality ingredients in the food we make and consume. Some are healthier than others, and some just taste better than others. I don't know how many times I've heard arguments over which meat counter and which grocery store is better than the others.

We all have our preferences and biases. Safe to say it's probably not the best idea to purchase your Thanksgiving mashed potatoes from Vinny's Gas Station or to cook that turkey that's been in your freezer for 23 years (those of you at the Thanksgiving Dinner last Sunday evening know that story).

Fresh ingredients are always better, not things that have tons of preservatives in them. But of course, fresh comes with a price. They're either more expensive or take more labor to turn into that finished product.

But if you've had something homemade, wow. There's nothing that beats it. The taste, the quality, the healthy goodness.

Something is just different about a meal when the ingredients are better.

Let's think about the Thanksgiving meals we will sit down to eat on Thursday, no matter where we eat them or what the menu is. They will probably be unique. They will probably contain the dishes we don't

normally eat other days during the year. In other words, the ingredients will be better.

And I'll bet that most of the meals set before us will contain one element that has a tendency to get overlooked — bread.

I don't know where bread ranks on your list of most desirable Thanksgiving meal ingredients, but it's not at the top of my list. Whether it's sliced bread or some sort of specialty rolls, as good as it is, it ranks at the bottom of my wish list behind, well, just about everything else.

But bread can be foundational to a meal. I know there are many households where, no matter the day, bread is always served with dinner.

My maternal grandparents lived on a farm. Grandpa farmed the land and Grandma was a strong and involved farm wife. And that involvement meant cooking the meals for the men who did the farming.

And for every noon meal, which was the big meal of the day, she provided homemade wheat bread. It was always on her dinner table—a staple, a foundational piece of the meal. And it was delicious.

I had it many times. My cousins and I still remember its taste and texture as a staple of our childhoods at their home.

Still, though, the bread wasn't the meat and potatoes. Bread is a foundational ingredient to a great meal. But it's probably not the main dish.

In John 6, Jesus describes himself as the bread of life. So, you'd think he would've understood bread as the most basic, foundational, and perhaps only sustenance a person needs.

Or, maybe he knew that bread is not the only food a person requires but is the necessary foundation for a nutritious menu.

In fact, Jesus himself, when he was tempted in the wilderness, rebuffed the devil by saying, "Man cannot live by bread alone." So there you have it.

Yet, Jesus calls himself the bread of life. Do we need more in our lives besides Jesus? Could Jesus be suggesting that while faith in him is the vital foundation for the spiritual life, a healthy spirituality needs some other ingredients as well?

Do we dare say we need more than Jesus? Yeah, that's a reasonable conclusion. Jesus leaves open the possibility that we can distort our spiritual lives by getting this bread metaphor wrong.

One distortion is to try to live on the bread of life *alone*. I'm not sure it's possible. In fact, in our attempt to spread the Good News of Jesus, it's probably not a winning strategy to proclaim to young people that they don't and shouldn't need anything but Jesus.

Try telling a teenager that they only need Jesus. And see how that flies as they play video games, watch Tik Tok videos, and start taking notice of the opposite gender.

Actually, no matter what our age, no matter how deep and vital our relationship with Jesus and no matter how committed we are to following his example and trusting his teaching, it's the rare one of us who really finds that faith in Jesus *alone* is enough for spiritual health or any other category. And if we really consider the implications of Jesus' statement about being the bread of life, we can surmise *that he never intended to be all we ever need*.

In the first century, of course, all the actual bread was whole grain. The refining process that yields white bread had not yet been invented, but neither had the capacity to enrich bread either, so the whole-grain bread of Jesus' day was even less nutritionally complete than our bread today. So we can assume Jesus' bread-of-life statement meant that faith in him is the essential foundation of a spiritual life, but is not *everything* we need for spiritual health.

That's at least part of the reason that from the time of the early church on, Christians have found it essential to meet together for worship and fellowship. The author of Hebrews told his readers to not neglect to meet together, because they needed to encourage one another and to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24-25). For our faith to grow and mature, we need Jesus; but we need each other through the power of the Holy Spirit to bring an awareness of Jesus' power into being. We depend on the church—the people that make up the church—to be another key ingredient to a vital life of faith.

It's the church that brings Jesus alive in our hearts. It helps us hear the Spirit awakening us to the power of Jesus' love and grace. It's the church that reminds us of the power of community, which helps meet our need to live lives together that reflect the kind of discipleship Jesus calls us to embrace.

Jesus is not all that we need. He's an essential ingredient and the most important, even. But we need more. The church, the blessing of loved ones who inspire and console and who bring joy and strength to our lives—these are also so important to a sustainable faith.

Now, the opposite is true, too: While we need the blessing of church and community to bolster our faith in Jesus, we must make sure that the key ingredient, Jesus himself, is not *omitted* from the recipe.

Any of you who are cooks may have a time or two unwillingly altered a recipe that prevented your dish from achieving its desired result. It may have meant you left out an ingredient or a key step in the preparation process.

Mrs. Garity's Kindergarten class put together its own cookbook for thanksgiving one year. Here was some instruction from the kids on how to prepare the turkey:

- You cut the turkey up and put it in the oven for ten minutes and 300 degrees. You put gravy on it and eat it.—Russell
- You buy the turkey and take the paper off. Then you put it in the refrigerator and take it back out and cut it with a knife and make sure all the wires are out and take out the neck and heart. Then you put it in a big pan and cook it for half an hour at 80 degrees. Then you invite people over and eat.—Jeremy
- First you buy it at Fred Meyer. Then you cut it up and cook it for 15 hours at 200 degrees. And then eat it.—Brandon
- First you cut the bones out. Then you put it in the oven for 10 hours at 600 degrees, before putting it on the table and eating it.—Moriah
- First you shoot it, and then you cut it. And then you put it in the oven and cook it for 10 minutes and 20 degrees. You put it on plates and then you eat it.—Alan

Yeah, that'd be some interestingly tasting bird.

You've got to get the ingredients and the cooking times right. You can't leave anything out.

In our faith, Jesus is one ingredient of several that can't be left out. The bread of life must be in our recipe that makes for a sustainable faith.

To be a Christian, we need Jesus. Sounds obvious, but we all tend to think once in a while that we can be Christians without having to deal with Jesus, at least a Jesus who claimed, or for whom claims were made, to be the Son of God.

Our Thanksgivings this week will include many of the familiar ingredients that tell us it's Thanksgiving: turkey maybe, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie. Friends or family around the table, a little football on the TV perhaps.

And there is also a proper recipe for acknowledging our thanksgivings: And it contains the better ingredients of a sustainable faith: Jesus and the blessing of others who sustain us and help move us forward in faith.

Now thank we all our God.