

Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Sunday, 5 August 2018
No 'Best Use By' Date
Hebrew Scripture: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
Christian Scriptures: John 6:24-35

As a bachelor, I'm visiting the grocery store more often than before. Just yesterday, I saw Dart at PriceChoppers. While there at the store, I noticed that almost every item for sale has some kind of 'Best If Bought By...', "Best By..." or "Best Before...", "Use Before..." date.



Variations abounded. "Sell By...", "Refrigerate after Opening". I noticed as the items came closer to the date in question, they are moved to a special section and the price decreases. In this section, I expect to see labels that read, "Best If Used before It Spoils". I suppose no one wants to buy a 'science experiment'.

But, I'm not too choosy about what I buy. I will purchase food a little past the "Sell By..." date. I think I would even purchase food

that went a little past the “Use By...” date. I would stop my spending spree if it was past the “Will Probably Kill By...” date. What if stores sold food that never expired? What would that food be like? I suppose C-rations (the ‘C’ stands for ‘combat’, I believe) or MREs (‘Meal Ready to Eat’). I read somewhere that MREs can last over five years. I heard there is a competition in Europe to eat long lost, but recently found, C-rations from WWII. Ugh! So, we don’t see a lot of MREs in the grocery stores. *Certainly not* at the Food Co-op!

After I chatted with Dart in the store, I got to thinking that the common denominator in all these labels is ‘time’ - how and why is food, or in our case, bread, perishable or not?

Let us turn to our scriptures. We heard the familiar story of manna falling from heaven. The Israelites, escaping from the Egyptian army, were lost and wandering in the desert. Shoh, life was tough before GPS and Sat. Nav.! They howled at Moses for not getting directions. They whined and complained to Moses, saying he forgot the cooler and they had no water bottles. To make matters worse, there was no Hannafords and they felt they were starving. Moses prayed for God to deliver him and the people. We read a strange frost like substance, a kind of gossamer pita bread, fell from the sky. The people could gather and eat, but only for a short time,

before it would evaporate into nothing. The people were told to gather only as much as they needed for the day and that they were not to save any of the manna for the next. Those who rationed their food to last until the next day found the manna full of maggots and smelling. Later, despite the fact that God provided two days' rations so the people could rest on the Sabbath, some went out to gather on the Sabbath. They found nothing.

In these two instances, the Israelites worried about scarcity; they were worried about the 'Use By...' date, and they either rationed or became greedy. In both cases, they disobeyed God.

Now, our second scripture reading from John's gospel relates the story about a crowd who followed Jesus around like a bunch of groupies. Earlier, they witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 and now they wanted to see, or rather eat, more of the same. Here we have a case of what Abraham Maslow referred to in his 1943 paper as humans' 'Hierarchy of Needs' whereby the most basic needs or 'motivators' are physiological (water, rest, warmth, and food). Maslow also said that the highest need is 'self-actualization'. In other words, the penultimate achievement is to reach one's God-given potential. I think Maslow got the idea for his 1943 paper from Jesus. Jesus stated quite clearly, "Most certainly I tell you, you

seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled” (John 6:26). Jesus encouraged them instead to not “work for the food which perishes, but for the food that remains to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27a).

Now, there is no doubt that Jesus believes people’s basic needs should be met. Jesus fed, and so do we in our partnership with Loaves and Fishes. Jesus also healed, a lot, so presumably he would have something to say about our country’s provision of health care. Jesus said, after the provision of basic needs, we must seek something far more substantive and long-lasting: The Bread of Life. Jesus then says to the people “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will *never* go hungry, and whoever believes in me will *never* be thirsty” (John 6:35).

So, we have two stories. Both seem to me to have ‘time’ as a common denominator. In the story of Moses, the manna quickly disappears or spoils. In the gospel, manna is also provided but it only briefly satisfies. Because manna is perishable, it thus seems to be scarce. A perspective of scarcity leads to hoarding and greed.

So, what could be the Bread of Life? Yes, it is Jesus. But what does Jesus represent? May I suggest ‘abundant inclusiveness’? You

see, as John 10:10 proclaims, Jesus came to give us life and to give it *abundantly*. ‘Abundant’ means the Bread of Life is inexhaustible and there is no ‘Used By...’ date. What is Jesus giving us abundantly? Love (for also in I John 4:8 it says “God is Love”), and therefore the desire to be in fellowship with all.

Women’s Spirit and I are next going to read a book written by Bernard Spong. In the book, Spong stated something very startling, but very obvious: The Apostle Paul, “who wrote between 51 and 64 CE” before the gospels were written, “never spoke of Jesus as a worker of miracles”, as a provider of signs for which the people were looking. So, if it was not signs and miracles that inspired Paul (and arguably all of the followers of Jesus up until the gospels were written), what was it? Spong wrote, the people of Jesus were inspired by “the breaking down of all the boundaries and barriers by which we human beings separate ourselves from one another. The power of God seen in Jesus was the overcoming of all our fears and divisions”.¹

Our common denominator in this church is our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life that breaks “down the boundaries and barriers by which we human beings separate

¹ Bernard Spong. *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 81.

ourselves from one another”. Jesus is the Bread of Life that “overcomes our fears and divisions”. This food will last us for eternity. And it is why I am proud to minister an O&A church.

The Bread of Life has no limits on its supply; it has no “Best Used By” date. Richard Rohr, the renowned Catholic priest in New Mexico teaches us that those who view manna, or material possessions, as scarce, will hoard that which we have or will greedily consume. Those who view manna as abundant, will live abundantly, they will be generous, they will share.² And so it is with the Bread of Life, with God, who is Love. If we view love to be scarce, hard to find and easily lost, then we will be inhibited from giving or sharing love ourselves. If we view love as sourced from God and therefore always renewable, then we will not withhold it from others. We will provide it abundantly, even when underserved. For this is the way of Jesus Christ, at whose table we will soon gather.

Friends in Christ, we live in a world that is terribly divided. We live a country that is terribly divided. We even live in a community that is terribly divided. [I wish to pause here and speak a little close to home. This poster was discovered hung in Brattleboro. As my

² Richard Rohr, “Worldviews of Abundance Verses Scarcity”, Postcast, 28 July 2018 at 10:00a.m., 9 minutes, 12.5 MB, audio.

daughter Madeline is welcomed here, how is something like this explained?



“Black Lives Don’t Matter: The Atomwaffen Division is Organized Near You”

After Micah, Madeline and I departed the movie theatre at 11:30pm after watching Mr. Roger’s “Won’t You Be My Neighbour”, there in the parking lot of the Latchis Hotel and Theatre, a young white man was bellowing at the top of his lungs, in a rage, that Blacks better watch out and there was “a war coming”. He yelled for blocks as my children ran for the car and locked themselves in (waiting nervously for me.)] What hope is there for the establishment of realm of God on Earth just as it is in heaven if we are also divided in this church?

Friends, I ask that you make peace with those in this congregation that you have wounded or who you feel wounded you. I ask that you invite those from our church who have wounded you,

or who you wounded, back into our fellowship. For in Jesus Christ, all our divisions are made null and void. Everything that separates us has been torn down by Jesus, the Bread of Life.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: Amen!