

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **Our Landmark of Faith**

John 6:35, 41-51

Landmarks are important to help us locate our way, especially when we are lost. Landmarks orient our lives. If we don't have important and clear signs and landmarks, our lives can result in chaos. Since my arriving July 1, I am experiencing an orientation to the Naples area and its important landmarks. Let me list a few landmarks I know: the Naples Pier, the Naples Zoo, Tin City, the Beaches, the Everglades, Hwy 41, 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the Philharmonic, and Coconut Point. In North Naples, this church and its steeple orient travelers on this road. These places are important landmarks and they help us orient our lives around the Naples. If we can find these places, then we will find our bearings.

Landmarks also can be symbols. And the church utilizes these symbols to point us to God's activity among us. Look around and take note of the numerous symbols: the Baptismal font, the Bible, the cross, the pulpit, and the pew are all unique to Christianity. As we gather as a community of faith, these symbols bring us together and find our bearings.

Our text today points to one particular symbol, or landmark, for the church – the Lord's Table. Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life... here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."* For nearly 2,000 years, we gather around the Lord's Table to eat this meal remembering and reassuring ourselves in this sacred landmark. In this sacrament we experience the invisible grace of God through the visible and tangible elements – the Bread and the Cup. This sacred meal is important because it carries with it past, future, and present implications.

**Our table recalls the past.** Many tables include the inscription carved into the wood saying, "In remembrance of me." Who do we remember? We remember a specific person, Jesus Christ, who in the past sat at table with his disciples eating bread and drinking from a cup. But not just any ordinary bread or drink! Following the meal He took some bread and blessed and broke it saying, "This is my body broken for you." At this table, we remember that moment over 2000 years ago. The breaking of the bread shows us visibly His broken body given on behalf of you, the world, and me. This meal is God's love revealed in our community. Remembering our past we bring ourselves, just as we are, to sit and dine with the King of kings and Lord of Lords.

Our text tell us that Jesus calls Himself the "Bread of Life" encouraging those gathered to eat of this Bread that brings eternal life. Around this table from the past he orients our past to His offer of forgiveness and salvation.

Are there guilt of deeds done or left undone? Is the pain from a divorce? A soured friendship? Ugly words said to your child? A theft? Adultery? All these past memories can be painful and our remembrance can cause us difficulties in living life abundantly. But memories can also be a source of solace and joy. The first kiss, the birth of a child, and the smell of grandfather's leather chair can all be happy, warm memories. So we gather around this table, and our good and bad past memories are brought under the full light of God, which reorients us to God's love and grace. We are forgiven and redeemed by a wonderful, loving God who sent His Son into the world because God cares for us.

**While rooted in the past, this table is about our future.** And our future, as children of God, is one of hope. Where is the hope? We find hope in this meal of Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation. Jesus promises that we will all sit at this table when He returns.

Recall for a moment what is happening in the world. From Main Street to Wall Street, our economy is shaken. While some recover is happening, we still are vulnerable and fragile as our country's financial debt and unemployment rise. Healthcare costs are soaring. According to the test scores, our children are falling behind in their test scores when compared to Asia and Europe. (Note: I am not sure how accurate this is because I have met and am continuing to meet youth who will be leaders in the church and this country.) Divorce rates are up as homes split up; the PCUSA is afraid for its survival, as the membership grows older. Pakistan is unstable. Our troop level is increasing as the violence spreads in Afghanistan. Hunger and poverty are deepening as the global economy adjusts to the market changes. Yet, in to this chaotic world, our text points us to the future. And in the future we find our hope. Jesus offers Himself as the Bread of Life, and when we sit at His table, we know an endless, eternal hope!

Our gathering to dine with each other in His memory around this table is but a foretaste of the future meal we have with Christ. Our future is a bright one. Jesus invites us to "Come! And sit and dine with Me." We all are invited from the East and West, the North and South to dine with Jesus. The church is built on His promise to return and this table is spread in hope in a bright future, no matter how the bad our past. This bread offered is no ordinary bread. This Bread is life giving.

**This Bread of Life orients us to the present.** Through the cross all our guilty sins washed away. This Bread's gift is our eternal future and is our hope. What is extremely important for us to know is, "What does "this Bread" offer for the present? Let Jesus say it for us. Jesus says, "This is my Body; this is my Blood." Not was His body. Not shall be His blood. No! Jesus words tell us He is present NOW! In other words, this meal sustains and nourishes us because we need it now. We can claim it daily.

There is no miracle in the bread and wine. Rather, we are the miracle. The miracle is in us! When we eat and drink from Christ's body with repentant and faithful hearts, the Holy Spirit moves among and in us, bringing whatever is necessary to keep us on our feet now.

- When Peter denied the Lord, our Lord met Peter at breakfast and Peter devoted himself again to the Savior.
- Two discouraged disciples were traveling the Emmaus road and a stranger joins them. Eventually this stranger shares a meal and the disciples recognized our Lord in the breaking of the bread.
- The doors were locked for fear of the Jews and Jesus materialized, eating, and rejuvenating the apostles at the table.

Jesus' promise to us is that where two or three are gathered that he will be in their midst. That means that Christ is indeed a present reality and that He is with us NOW!

And in our church, this table is placed front and center so that we can remember that we experience the real presence of God. This experience, while rooted in the past and pointing to a bright future, is today the present reality of Him who is the Life Giving Bread. Look to your right and to the left. Who do you see? In this meal we realize that we are indeed God's children with a place and a name. And that this meal shows us that others are too.