

HUNGRY – FOR THE BREAD OF LIFE

TEXT: John 6:35, 41-51

Today we look at the third dissertation on bread in the Gospel of John. We have dealt with Jesus feeding 5000+ on a hillside in Galilee and his focus on feeding not just their stomachs, but more importantly, their souls. Then, last week we found Jesus trying to get some time away from the crowds only to have them follow him across the Lake. They were still hungry for bread and had not yet figured out that God had given them Bread from Heaven that would sustain them far longer than the flour and yeast from the bakery.

Today's reading takes a little more thought to digest (pun intended). Jesus now tells the following crowds: "I am the bread of life". And then he goes on to try to explain just what that means. But I think we need to take a moment to hear Jesus take something we know so well that we barely pause to take note of, and he imbues it with meaning far beyond that which was first intended. Surely it was not in the mind of the one who first discovered the rising power of yeast. Nor the one who first experienced the texture of flour and water together taking shape in her hands. And no, not by the one who realized the powerful difference a tiny bit of added salt could make to one's palate. It is just bread, after all, and while in some circles now a less common part of our everyday diet, still part of all cultures in one form or another in every time and place for thousands of years.

In our reading today we hear of bread no fewer than three times. Jesus is speaking of himself, of course. He is pointing back to the wonder of "bread" provided to their ancestors in the wilderness. Whether it is Jesus breaking bread at the Last Supper or again at the house of his hosts at Emmaus, the bread that Sarah made for three visitors in the wilderness, or the Bread of the Presence in the Temple or the bread that Jesus had provided to the multitude, in our faith tradition, bread has always been a sign of God's abundant provision. Even in the most familiar prayer we share, we ask for bread, symbolizing everything we need for this day.

This story has several unique facets, and one that we sometimes overlook is that Jesus is mad today. It's hard to tell from here – sitting as we do in this time and place, so far removed from that moment with him but it matters that he's angry.

We're listening in on a tense conversation – an argument even, some might say – between Jesus and the Jews who have been following him, and challenging him, and questioning him for quite a while now. One scholar, someone smarter than me, even suggested that when Jesus says, “do not complain among yourselves,” that what he really means is “shut up”; maybe, “quit your whining”.

I think we need to be reminded at times about that side of Jesus – the human, frustrate-able side of Jesus. Remember his anger as he toppled the tables in the temple. He must have gotten mad more often than we hear about. Mad, here, because he's trying to “bring the kingdom” to the people around him and they just don't see it or get it or want it or even know what it means. He's mad because he's been having this same conversation with “the crowds” and the “the Jews” who were following him for so long – like for 6 chapters and 51 verses, if the Gospel text is any kind of measuring stick for that sort of thing – and, after all this time, they're still just bickering about the details.

You see, I kind of think Jesus as just trying to get the people to eat their theological vegetables. And not really vegetables, of course, but consuming something that is really good for them, the bread that came down from heaven. And he had to be so frustrated and angry, and sad, I imagine, that they just didn't get it, or want it, or understand it, or whatever.

Well, as it happens in the Gospel of John, not everything is what it seems...what are these people really hungry for, what are they looking for? It turns out that the “word made flesh, is more than some kind of miracle worker, or Jesus the “son of Joseph”, but is one who shows us the Father, one that connects us and makes us participants of the divine life.

It is not uncommon for us to confuse the thing with the person, the symptom for the problem, the want for the need. Those that were fed that day now come looking for more; Jesus then faces them with the reality of his identity, with the opportunity for a different life, if they “choose” to participate in it.

Those of us who claim Christ as our Lord find ourselves being fed by Christ’s own presence, and it is in that feeding that we are participants in the divine life. It is God reaching out to us, providing a way for grace, opening the doors for the holy to live among us: again and again and again as we participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

You can’t get much closer to something than when you eat of it. Taste, smell, and sight remind us, tell us, about who God is, teaches us something about the “Father”.

It has been like this from the beginning...I can imagine the rich earth that produces fruit as described in those early chapters of Genesis. I can hear the stories of people gathering around food and the promise of a land “full of milk and honey”.

I can also hear the prophetic call for us not to forget about those who hunger. After all God has never forgotten, has always provided. And so should we. In our eating and our drinking we too participate in this long story of a God who “feeds” and a people who serve. In a God who gives of God’s self and a people who follow in the way. It is no wonder those of us who participate in the eating of the bread of life are participating in something more!

Rick Morley is an Episcopal priest and rector of St. Mark’s Church in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. He identifies himself as a “follower of Jesus father of two, husband of one, Episcopal priest, with one book down, one blog up...surrounded by empty jars of nutella”. I would add that he is a wonderful thinker and writer, and I’d like to share with you one of his recent postings:

There was one brief, shining moment in the Hebrew Bible where things were pretty good. We had safety and security, we had the Presence of God walking among us. We had a nice garden.

And then we blew it. We had only been given one “thou shalt not”, and we couldn’t manage the “not” part. So we ate of the tree. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And what happened when we ate of this tree? Our eyes were opened, and you became “like God”, knowing good and evil.

But, you know, there was another tree in the Garden...The Tree of Life. And what happened when you ate of this tree? Well, we get the scoop on that when God talks of the consequences of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Then the Lord said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”.

So..obviously..we ate from the wrong tree. We were never told that we couldn’t eat from the Tree of Life..but we ate from the tree that we were told not to.

We could have lived forever. In that garden. With God. We were so close. It could have been great.

In John chapter 6, Jesus isn’t talking about trees and fruit, but rather bread. But, he talks about this bread in a familiar way. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

Jesus is speaking of himself. He’s speaking of the benefits of believing and abiding in him. Of consuming him, and making him a part of us, and us a part of him.

And..he’s so very clearly identifying himself as the new creation. The new garden. The new tree. The new fruit.

God's dream in Genesis was that we would live forever with Him, and in Jesus that dream gets a fresh start.

In Eden it could have been great, but we messed it up. But, now, in Jesus it can be great again. And, great forever. Amen.