

A Sermon for Sunday August 15, 2021

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer:

“the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

So, bread. At its very simplest bread is water and flour. Salt and some sort of leaven can be added. Bread has been understood to be the very staple of life along with water. Both are necessary for life, beyond that clothing and shelter are also necessary. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible tells us that bread was scarce in ancient Israel, because grain was scarce. Still, it as a staple of life. Making bread was women’s work. Wheat and barley were the two flours mostly used. Wheat was preferred by the wealthy, while the poor used barley. We heard that the loaves at the feeding of the five thousand were barley loaves. Those who were the poorest offered what they had. In times of need other cereals and legume seeds were added to increase the yield. Bread was used as a spoon of sorts to eat with. Dipping and scooping it into other food at the meal. Bread was necessary to sustain life.

Into this societal use and understanding of bread Jesus makes this bold claim “I am the bread of life.” When Jesus tells them that he is the bread of life, there is more to what he is saying than the actual bread needed to sustain one’s body. Just as Jesus told the woman at the well that he would give her living water. As we heard today Jesus is the living bread from heaven. When Jesus tells them “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you.” We have to ask what sort of life is he talking about?

John begins his gospel with a prologue that echoes the first chapter of Genesis. Genesis begins with the words “In the beginning when God created.” John says in his prologue: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” John continues: “All things came into being through

him. . . and the Word became flesh and lived amongst us.” In Genesis a wind from God sweeps across the face of the waters. Through that wind, “ruach” God’s spirit and God’s Word creation unfolds in Genesis. John is telling us that Jesus is the Word of creation. The Word made flesh, the incarnate Word we know as Jesus. The Word of God brings life. Jesus is that life in the flesh. We hear Jesus tell us that the bread which sustains life is his body, his flesh. Commentators point out that this full passage from John is one of the most difficult in scripture. Eating Jesus’ flesh, drinking his blood. What was John about? What was Jesus about?

It is helpful to remember that this passage from John comes before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, before the Last Supper, before, his arrest, and death on the cross, before his resurrection. John’s gospel has no last supper in the way the other gospels do. There are no words of institution. There was a meal. However, in John the foot washing is the main focus. Bread is mentioned. After he has washed their feet, Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him. He says the one who will betray him is “the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it into the dish.”

Those who heard or read John’s gospel were people who were already sharing in a eucharistic meal as believers. They would have heard these passages I suspect as a commentary on the meal they were already sharing with one another. The question from the bystanders “What is this about” was the question those in and around John’s community were asking. What is this meal about that we share with one another? It is a question for us as well. Beyond the questions about the Eucharist, commentators suggest that the passage is about more than the meal. It is about faith. It is about how we live our lives connected to God and to one another. Our faith, who we are as a community of faith is more than just our individual faith, our individual lives. It is about community. Jesus is about community. Jesus

as the bread of life is about life sustaining faith lived in the midst of community which sustains our lives.

The word used for eating in today's reading switched from "esthio" eating to "trogo" which translates closer to munching, chewing. We are to chew on Jesus. We are to take Jesus' life, his words, his actions, and chew on them. Brian Peterson tells us in his commentary on this passage that this is noisy eating. "It is urgent even desperate. It is eating as though life depends on it, because it does." Eating becomes for Peterson a metaphor for belief in Jesus. "Part of the point is that the Eucharist is life-giving because it is Jesus himself who is given. The Eucharist is life-giving because it draws us deeper into relationship with Jesus. so that we might "abide." The Eucharist becomes the place where we abide in Jesus, where we are fed by God. How do we chew on Jesus?

Henri Nouwen writes: "When we invite friends for a meal, we do much more than offer them food for their bodies. We offer friendship, fellowship, good conversation, intimacy, and closeness. When we say, "Help yourself . . . take some more . . . don't be shy . . . have another glass," we offer our guests not only our food and our drink but ourselves. A spiritual bond grows, and we become food and drink for one another. In the most complete and perfect way, this happens when Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist as food and drink. By offering us his Body and Blood, Jesus offers us the most intimate communion possible."

For Christians Jesus and our understanding of the Eucharist as both a remembrance and an experienced presence of Christ is at the heart of the church.

Richard Rohr writes: "The Eucharist is telling us that God is the food and all we have to do is supply the hunger." "In the Eucharist, we move beyond mere words or rational thought and go to that place where we don't talk about the

Mystery; we begin to chew on it.” Henri Nouwen writes: “Through the Eucharist, God’s incarnation continues to happen at any time and at any place.” Each Sunday and I suspect at other times of the week, we find ourselves saying the Lord’s prayer in which we ask “give us this day our daily bread.” “Jesus is our daily bread.”

Jesus does more than nourish our bodies, Jesus feeds us and nourishes our faith. When I was young and just beginning to take communion which by the way was just after I had been confirmed at the age of 12 or 13, communion only happened once a month at my home church, St. Mark’s in Orchard Park, New York. I remember my mother telling me not to chew the wafer which tasted like what I imagine cardboard tasted like. As I put it in my mouth, most times, it managed to get stuck on the roof of my mouth and I would spend a good part of the rest of the service trying to get it off.

Later, while serving at my first parish in Ellicott City, Maryland. I ran across this novel idea while preparing for a sermon to invite people to actually chew on the wafer and when doing that think about chewing on Jesus. Chewing on Jesus means to take intentional time to think about who Jesus is for us, what he taught us, how he lived his life, what he was asking us to do and be as we live our lives. Another church I served used real bread which made the idea of chewing on Jesus more real. I helped make bread with a youth group at one point, which was then served as the bread for the eucharist. To mix and shape, to bake the bread and to slowly chew on the bread, to take in its flavor and texture while thinking about Jesus is a very different way to take communion. Now, as a priest serving communion, when I look into your eyes as you receive the bread, when I eat the bread of communion with you intentionally, and when I look out at everyone gathered, when I do that the meaning of a community of faith becomes clear.

Jesus is the bread of life. The glue, if you will, which holds us together wherever we are; here at church, at home, when we are out in the world. As we continue to live with the effects of the on-going pandemic, at times still separated physically, Jesus words to us can sustain us. We carry that bread of life within us. Jesus is part of us and we a part of Jesus. If we look out at the world through our Jesus' eyes, compassion and love can help us get past any fear or anxiety. God the incarnate in Jesus lives in us. We can live into the pandemic and all the other things happening in our lives trusting that God is there with us in all of it, forgiving us, loving us. As we are called to do the same.