

Pentecost 13 – Proper 15

Year B

Living Bread

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Even as Jesus is saying these words you can imagine some would-be disciples slipping to the back of the crowd before making a beeline home. Watching Jesus give sight to the blind and making the lame walk would have been amazing, but now he is not making any sense. Just beyond our reading for today, many of his disciples will say among themselves, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” The twelve will stick with Jesus, but many others will fall away. Knowing Jesus as a great teacher is one thing but talking about your flesh as food and your blood as drink must have sounded like the rabbi had lost it.

Our lectionary, or pattern of readings for Sunday worship, has really slowed down this month. We are on our third out of four weeks in a row on a single chapter of John’s Gospel. It helps to recall this discourse follows Jesus’ feeding 5,000 people as the time for the Passover approaches. With that central Jewish feast in mind, Jesus referring to the bread that comes down from heaven makes more sense. Jesus is reinterpreting the story of the Passover and the Exodus through his own life and ministry.

Jesus has given them physical food but uses that to teach that he can give them spiritual food as well. He said, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” He wants those who are listening to him to not just eat some bread and fish and then go home to hunger again. He wants them to develop a spiritual hunger and thirst that he and only he can fill. And to teach this, Jesus uses the Passover story, which was about moving from slavery to freedom, to show how faith in him also moves his followers from death to life.

It is a spiritual lesson difficult to grasp. The words from this gospel are given in the first year of Jesus’ three years of ministry. John’s Gospel, with these Bread of Life passages coming so early in his ministry, makes clear what the other three Gospels only hint at—the Eucharist is not about Jesus’ sacrificial death alone. Our faith is not in Jesus’ death and resurrection alone, but in Jesus’ whole life from Bethlehem to Golgotha and beyond to an empty tomb in a garden and Jesus’ appearances to his disciples. Jesus’ whole life, rather than the events of the last days of his life, institutes the sacrament of communion.

Everything Jesus did—who Jesus was and how he acted—is part of God’s revelation to us. We are to take Jesus’ whole story and make it part of our story. God took Jesus’ whole life, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to us. We are to let that story of God’s love for us take us, bless us, break us, and give us back to the world.

This is something that happens in the liturgy as we enter the story. We don’t just listen to the words, “Take, eat,” but we actually get up—we come to the altar to actually take and eat the bread that has been broken and given. We enter the story and then we are called to make the whole story a part of our story.

Dom Gregory Dix in his work of scholarship on the Eucharist, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, wrote, “At the heart of it all is the eucharistic action, a thing of an absolute simplicity—the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread and the taking, blessing and giving of a cup of wine and

water, as these were first done with their new meaning by a young Jew before and after supper with His friends on the night before He died....Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.”

The communion that Jesus spoke of in John’s sixth chapter, describing himself as living bread, is something that has woven itself deeply into the human story. Think of all the places you have taken communion, and the people whom you have taken communion alongside—people still living that you don’t see anymore, people now long dead and seen only by God. Imagine all the places in which God has experienced this Eucharistic meal. Jesus is the Bread that Came Down from Heaven, whose presence sustains in every place and situation in which we find ourselves. It is no wonder that Jesus’ command to take, bless, break, and give is so obeyed.

We need this strengthening of the Body and Blood of Jesus encountered in the Eucharist; when we are apart from God, we find it easier and easier to remain apart from God and to rely on other, lesser answers to our deep hungers and thirsts—hungers and thirsts which only Jesus can satisfy. This is where the comparison to physical hunger and thirst helps us as we know that we need the nourishment of food and drink again and again. We may eat a good meal now, but we will need another tomorrow and one in between those two as well. In that same way, we need spiritual nourishment again and again.

There are two important components to the Christian walk. The first is coming to faith in Jesus, for which we have the sacraments of baptism and confirmation to mark us as Christ’s own forever. But coming to faith is just the first important step on what is to be a lifelong journey.

To continue the journey, to really progress in the life of faith, you need some practices in daily life that make this real. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, is encouraging all Episcopalians to find the way right for them to consider seven practices for a Jesus-centered life. Central to these practices is worship. The other practices are to turn, learn, pray, bless, go, and rest. For this week, we are just focusing on worship and how Jesus feeds us in the Eucharist just as he promised in teaching, “I am the Bread of Life.” The full seven practices of The Way of Love can be found online at episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove.

I know that I am preaching to the choir, as I am preaching to people who made their way to church this morning for the very Word and sacrament about which I am preaching. But I also know that from time to time, each of us can find ourselves feeling distanced from God. And so, this is a word to the wise that when that happens, know that staying away from the altar is not the way to find healing. Keep coming. Keep asking for and expecting the peace which Jesus alone can give. You need the nourishment you find here as much as you need something to eat and something to drink.

You are also in contact every day with others who have found themselves apart from church. This is the place where God can speak to their hearts through our readings and the sermon and the Spirit’s presence in them in worship. It is also the place where they can receive the bread and wine of communion and so experience Jesus’ very real, sustaining presence in an irreplaceable way: the nourishment you need for your hungry soul.

It is returning, again and again, week after week, for Jesus' presence in Word and the sacrament of the Eucharist that we are conformed more and more to be like Jesus. And in those times in life when challenges arise and we are not sure we have what it takes, we return again to be sustained by Jesus' presence. And if we begin to feel unworthy of God's love, we know that we can always return to the altar, confess, and receive forgiveness. Then through the Christ's presence in the sacrament, we are fed for the coming week. For Jesus gave us this bread so that we might live.

Amen.

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