

Sunday, August 5, 2018
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13 (Year B)
Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4.1-16; John 6.24-35
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Have you ever had one of those conversations where you and the person you are talking with just seem to be talking past each other? What each of you is saying is reasonable, and at least for a while, the conversation seems to make sense. Yet, at some point, it begins to seem that you are each on your own wavelength. And it becomes increasingly clear that at least one of you just is not getting what the other is saying (it's usually the other person).

That's kind of the sense I get in today's Gospel reading from Jesus' "Bread of Life Discourse." This is the second of five weeks of this train of thought, and the first week where Jesus actually says, "I am the bread of life." Jesus is talking about bread on one level—the spiritual level. And the other folks in the conversation are talking about bread on another—the physical level. And while Jesus knows what the others are getting at, he isn't playing into it. He's going to make them work for it. Leading them step-by-step to the point he is ultimately wanting to make. But no matter what he says, they just don't quite get what he's trying to tell them. There are moments when they seem to be starting to get it, but then they return to their old way of thinking. Two steps forward, one step back. If this is how things are going to go, it's no wonder it takes five weeks for us to come to an understanding on this whole bread of life thing.

Following the feeding of the 5,000 that we heard last week, Jesus heads off to Capernaum. Some of those who had had been present on that remote mountainside are so awestruck with what Jesus did, they want to make him their king. Surely he must be the messiah—the one who will free the people from bondage, even if it is only bondage to scarcity and hunger. So the next day, they head off in search of Jesus. When they find him, Jesus immediately names the elephant in the room. "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (Jn 6.26). They want Jesus because they think with him around, there will always be plenty to eat. They don't recognize the significance of what he did the day before. How in the miracle of the feeding of 5,000 people with a mere five loaves and two fish, the presence of God was revealed to them in the person of Jesus. And pre-crucifixion and pre-resurrection, there is no way they can even begin to comprehend who Jesus really is and what he will ultimately provide. So he tries to fill them in. But they are solely focused on the fact that Jesus provided food to eat. Which to many of them was probably no small thing. Many of them were likely poor and on the margins of society. Their most pressing need at any given moment was where they were going to get their next meal.

But there is obviously something bigger, something more significant going on here. Jesus tells them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (Jn 6.27a). Now just to be clear, when Jesus says "eternal life," he is not talking about immortal life or a future life in heaven. Rather, eternal life is a metaphor for living in the unending presence of God. Not just in some unknown future, but here and now.

Those whom Jesus is talking to are starting to get the idea. Or so it seems. For they respond, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (Jn 6.28). A good start. They’re shifting their attention from their own desires to God’s. Jesus responds that it’s not about performing works per se, but about believing in God. It’s about faith. And then it starts to unravel. Those who are listening may hear the words, but they don’t get the meaning. For they then ask, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” (Jn 6.30). They still want proof. They are not to a point of being able to go on faith.

In their collective memory—that of the people of Israel—they are drawn back to the Exodus, to the time in the wilderness, when the people were again questioning God’s presence among them. As we heard in the Old Testament reading, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness,” saying, “. . . for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex 16.2-3). There in the wilderness, God provides for the people. He provides quail for meat and manna for bread to feed the people. To assure them that he is still with them. Only all they see is that there is food on the table. For them, the manna in the wilderness is nothing more than a quick fix to a temporary need until they reach the Promised Land. So now, with Jesus, it’s déjà vu. They are saying the same thing. “So what are you going to do to prove yourself so we will have faith? You know, like Moses giving us manna.” There they go. Back to wanting bread. And failing to see the bigger picture.

What they fail to realize is that they have already received the sign they demand when they witnessed Jesus feeding them and the others just the day before on that remote mountainside. They are struggling with what it means to have faith. They are struggling with the tangible vs the intangible. Bread to eat vs bread of life. Loaves of bread vs eternal life. Jesus challenges those seeking him to consider the real nature of their quest. He then masterfully guides them in understanding that bread is merely a perishable commodity that only leads to temporary fulfillment. But that faith in him, faith in God, results in something that is imperishable and produces lasting fulfillment. That is, eternal life.

Jesus is pushing the multitude to seek more than the satisfaction of their physical hunger. He is leading them to embrace that which satisfies their spiritual hunger—a hunger they aren’t even aware they have. To realize that he as the bread of life satisfies their deepest hungers. And he does this by using a very physical image that they can relate to. Bread. That he is the bread of life.

It’s easy to sit back and look with pity, even disdain, at those who are stalking Jesus, wanting him to give them more bread. Lest we be too hard on them, maybe we need to consider how we might be more like them than we would care to admit. I don’t mean that as a criticism or a condemnation directed toward anyone in particular. If anything, it is a commentary on and a criticism of the nature of our culture and society. The increasing focus on consumerism. Madison Avenue and every commercial on TV and every ad in magazines and in our social media feeds trying to convince us to buy, buy, buy. And if we already have a particular item, to buy the newest and best version. Only by having more and newer and better stuff can we truly be happy, can we truly be satisfied, can we truly be fulfilled. Only then will our hunger be

satisfied. Only it will never truly be fulfilled, will it? Because there will always be something newer and better beckoning.

There's no denying that in many parts of the world and even in our own country, there is still a very real need for something as simple as bread. But here in the richest country in the world, perhaps this peddling of and quest for more and newer and better stuff is the modern day equivalent of asking Jesus to give us bread. It is seeking some sort of fulfillment in that which is perishable and therefore temporary. Masking, even diverting us from our quest for that which is imperishable and therefore eternal.

Jesus' assertion that he is the bread of life is no less applicable to a society obsessed with, even plagued by, consumerism than it was to a society in need of basic human sustenance. Perhaps even more so. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

While we the Church have little control when it comes to societal pressures, we do offer a place where a different set of norms prevail. Where we can focus on satisfying our spiritual hunger. We offer a place where we can focus on that which is imperishable and eternal. A place where we can live into Jesus' promise that he is the bread of life, and all that that promise entails.

This is not a new quest. We see this in our Epistle reading for today, written nearly 2,000 years ago. The Letter to the Church in Ephesus tells us what is expected of those who seek to follow the Risen Christ. Today's reading focuses on unity in the community of faith. Specifically, we are reminded that we are all in this together. That none of us has to go it alone. That the Church exists "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4.12-13).

And in being equipped for the work of our individual ministries, for the work of building up the Body of Christ—supporting and nurturing each other in our respective ministries—we learn the true meaning of Jesus being the bread of life. That ultimately it is he who nurtures us, gives us strength, gives meaning to our lives. And we live into the benefits of having received this bread of life. As we live into the promise of eternal life here and now, in our daily lives. As we continue to live into that promise, it becomes more and more evident over time that that which is perishable and temporary is nothing compared with that which is imperishable and eternal.

Strengthened by the community of faith, we are able to diminish our pursuit of the bread that is perishable, in all its forms, and instead hold out our hands to receive the only bread that matters: Jesus Christ, who is the bread of life. Knowing that in him, all our deepest hungers and thirsts will be satisfied.