

Sunday, August 12, 2018
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14 (Year B)
Ephesians 4.25—5.2; John 6.35, 41-51
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How quickly things change. The day before at the feeding of the 5,000, those present were full of praise, saying, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (Jn 6.14). Because they were enamored with him and what he accomplished, “Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king” (Jn 6.15). But now, when he tries to get them to see what he is really about—being the bread of life that came down from heaven—they become offended, a little indignant, maybe even a little combative.

“Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6.42). As they see it, Jesus is just too ordinary to be the one who personally brings God’s bread of life down from heaven. And certainly he could not be that living bread himself. They find his claims unimaginable. But it’s not like they didn’t know who Jesus was before today. They knew all along who his parents were, where he came from. And they still thought him a prophet and wanted to make him king. But once he started trying to explain things to them—things that were a little too difficult for them to comprehend—they turn on him.

Truth be told, what was likely the real cause of their indignation was that they finally began to understand that when Jesus said “I am the bread of life,” he was not talking about bread to eat but something else. As he talked more about it (what we heard in last week’s installment of the Bread of Life Discourse), it became more and more clear that this bread of life thing wasn’t something to eat, but was something spiritual. Who wants that?!?

Perhaps the people’s indignation is not all bad. Maybe this is a good sign, because they’re starting to get what Jesus is saying. He tries to go back to a common frame of reference. To one they raised previously. To the all-important event in their collective memory as the Chosen People of God. To the Exodus. “You remember the manna in the wilderness? Well, our ancestors ate bread from heaven and yet, they died. That was just a means to physical sustenance. But what I’m offering is even better. As wonderful and life-giving as the manna was, this new gift of bread from heaven is even more wonderful, even more life-giving.”

While the explanation Jesus provides is a little difficult to follow—such is John’s Gospel—the bottom line is pretty simple. They don’t need to understand how it all works. All they need to know is that this bread of life is a gift from God. A gift freely given to them. Woven throughout the explanation is the theme that Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven (v 41, 50, 51), sent from the Father (v 44). To further emphasize the point is the repeated use of “I am the bread of life.” “I am the living bread.” “I AM.” The same words God spoke from the burning bush in response to Moses asking who he should say sent Moses to the Israelites. “I AM WHO I AM . . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex 3.14). I AM. The God who led the people out of Egypt. I AM. The God who fed the people with manna in the wilderness. I AM. The One who provides this new gift of bread from heaven, the bread of life. In Jesus’ words to

the people, "I am" provides the direct link between himself and God. That he himself is the gift that God is offering.

Jesus then sums this all up by saying "The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6.51). Helping the people come full circle. Taking this from some obscure spiritual level to the more tangible, physical level. But not the physicality of a loaf of bread made of wheat, water, and yeast. Rather, the physical level of being something accessible through Jesus. Something accessible through Jesus' own flesh. Through his death on a cross where he will give up his flesh for their sake.

Jesus explains their disbelief by saying that no one can come to him, no one can believe in him, apart from the will and action of God the Father. God is the one who draws us closer to Jesus. In other words, we don't just come to faith by ourselves, by some sort of personal reasoning and insight alone. Oh, we might think we do. But the reality is, according to Jesus, we are drawn, invited, wooed, by God. And of course, where our own freewill and human agency (for these are gifts from God, as well) come into play is when we reach out and accept the gift of himself that Jesus offers. The gift of his Son that God offers. Our only responsibility is for how we respond to God's initiative. Do we stand back and argue as the Judeans did? Or do we willingly reach out and accept what is offered? God does not demand that we accept. But he hopes we do.

There is a story told and retold in the Middle East about how to help someone who's drowning.

The story goes that a man had fallen into a river. He was not much of a swimmer and was in real danger of drowning. A crowd of concerned people wanted to rescue him. They were standing at the edge of the water, each of them urgently shouting out to him:

"Give me your hand, give me your hand!"

The man was battling the waves and ignored their urgent plea. He kept going under and was clearly struggling to take another breath.

A saintly man walked up to the scene. He too cared about the drowning man. But his approach was different. Calmly he walked up to the water, waded in up to his knees, glanced lovingly at the drowning man, and said: "Take my hand."

Much to everyone's surprise, the drowning man reached out and grabbed the saint's hand. The two came out of the dangerous water. The drowning man sat up at the edge of the water, breathing heavily, looking relieved, exhausted, and grateful.

The crowd turned toward the saint and asked in complete puzzlement: "How were you able to reach him when he didn't heed our plea?"

The saint calmly said: "You all asked him for something, his hand. I offered him something, my hand. *A drowning man is in no position to give you anything.*"

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When we were drowning in our own human weakness, in our own sinfulness, God did not demand that we give ourselves to him. Well, he did in the Old Testament, but that obviously didn't work, so he changed tactics. He lovingly reached out and offered himself to us, in the form of his Son, Jesus Christ.

What we do once pulled into God's loving arms is up to us. There is no obligation. No strings attached. But we who have chosen to follow Christ take the gift of the bread of life freely given very seriously. And out of gratitude, we make another response. We choose to become part of the Body of Christ. Thereby giving additional meaning to Jesus' words: "The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The life that Christ gives is his own flesh, given up for us on the cross. We seek to acknowledge that supreme sacrifice by trying to live into what that means in our own flesh – our own flesh as individuals, and in the flesh that is the collective Body of Christ. Jesus' body in the world comprised of the flesh of all who follow him. The body that lives into the eternal life given to us, even now.

In our Epistle reading from Ephesians, Paul tells us what the eternal life Jesus talks about looks like. The eternal life that is received in our baptism and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Paul concludes with these marching orders: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5.1-2). The whole purpose of Christ's life and of our lives as his followers is to give ourselves for others as an outward sign of the love we have first received from God.

Being imitators of God does not mean Christians are—or are even expected to be—perfect. Rather that we allow the Spirit to work in us and through us so that our lives reflect the love of Christ and the forgiveness we received through Christ's death and resurrection. So that our words and actions, so that our very lives, are a reflection of the gift of eternal life received from Christ, the bread of life.

Jesus calls us beyond our bodily hunger to notice a deeper spiritual hunger. The hunger for the grace of God. The hunger for relief from our fears and struggles. The hunger for reassurance, love, and hope. A hunger that can only be satisfied by him, the living bread that leads to eternal life. So, come, reach out and receive this gift freely offered by our Lord.