

Sunday, August 8, 2021
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14 (Year B)

Psalm 34.1-8; John 6.35, 41-51

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3178207069160985>

(Sermon begins at about 20:20)

“Taste and See That the Lord Is Good”

Our Psalm for today ends with the verse: “Taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are they who trust in him” (Ps 34.8). I have always found this to be an interesting image, albeit a little cryptic. I mean, we can see that the Lord is good based on God’s actions throughout salvation history, some parts of the Old Testament notwithstanding. The overarching message of the Bible is that God is loving, compassionate, and merciful. That God provides for the needs of his people. This view of God being good is far easier to see in the New Testament, with God coming to live among us in the form of his Son Jesus. With the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life made possible through Jesus’ death and resurrection. As the Psalmist points out, we can plainly see that God is indeed good through God’s actions as recorded in Scripture. But what about the “taste” part? How can one taste that the Lord is good? I wonder that every time I read this portion of Psalm 34. Yet, I’ve never taken the time to ponder that. Until now.

As I’ve noted, we can plainly see that God is good. But the phraseology, “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” at least to me, does not imply two independent actions: tasting and seeing. To me, it implies tasting as a way of seeing or determining that the Lord is good. As in “taste and you will see that the Lord is good.” One action—tasting—leading to a conclusion—seeing, or ascertaining—that the Lord is good. Taken at face value, Psalm 34 does not provide any clue as to what the Psalmist meant by this statement. Yet, today’s Gospel, written nearly 1,100 years after the Psalm, just might. We are in the second week of our look at the Bread of Life Discourse—part of Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue in Capernaum which is characterized by the refrain “I am the bread of life” and associated imagery.

In today’s section of the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus has teaching and learning on his mind. He clearly states: “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (Jn 6.45). This is one more clue to the multi-faceted image of Jesus being “the bread of life.” Last week we talked about Jesus the bread of life as being about faith and relationship. About Jesus and faith in him being the means to true and deeper relationship with God. Today, we look at a different aspect of this same image. Of Jesus as the bread of life providing the means of learning about, of gaining knowledge into, who God is.

From the start, Jesus has something different in mind when he uses the imagery of bread. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn 6.35). He talks about those who receive this “bread,” those who come to him, those who believe in him, never hungering or thirsting again. This is about more than just bread. Jesus is pointing to a deeper, more profound form of nourishment. Throughout the

Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus references—explicit in the portion we heard last week and implicit in portions of today’s passage—God providing manna to the Hebrews in the wilderness. Those hearing this would have been familiar with the idea that God providing heavenly bread was symbolic of a kind of teaching, meant to humble the Israelites and foster their trust in God. As noted in Deuteronomy, “[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes for the mouth of the LORD” (Deut 8.3). In other words, manna was food, the “bread of heaven,” but was symbolic of deeper nourishment: divine instruction and guidance. Similarly, Jesus’ words today move back and forth between images of being fed and images of learning, between images of the bread of life and images of receiving divine instruction.

This is a foundational image for the Gospel according to John. Remember how John begins his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1.1). The initial description of Jesus as the Word, or in Greek, *Logos*. And in Greek philosophical thought, which seems to have influenced John’s writings, *logos* means more than just “word.” *Logos* is more aptly defined as the principle of order or knowledge. As an organizing principle that is the foundation of knowledge. In the Christian sense, the foundation for all of creation. The organizing principle or structure for all that is, through which God makes himself known to humanity. Jesus’ use of the term “bread of life” is meant to connect with this concept of him as the *Logos*. One commentator notes that “As the *Logos*, Jesus is life’s source, our source, the cosmic source of sustenance and vitality. And as the *Logos*, the Word of God, Jesus is also life’s pattern, the Way of life and health and salvation. We are made to trust in, abide in, live in this pattern, this Way—and Jesus has come, with both physical bread and the ‘living bread’ of wisdom, to nourish us, and guide us, and bring us back to life (John 6:51).”¹

Jesus’ image of himself as the “bread of life” is meant to be another, perhaps more accessible, image for him as *Logos*, as the Word made flesh, as Divine knowledge incarnate. Particularly for his original hearers who may not have been educated in Greek systems of philosophical thought. The “bread of life” imagery would have been Jesus’ attempt to take a common everyday item—bread—and equate it with a different kind of nourishment. Equating bread with knowledge. Equating eating with learning. Remember, his original hearers would have already had that foundational understanding based on their knowledge and understanding of manna in the wilderness—the “bread of heaven”—as an image for the instruction God provided during their wilderness journey.

When you stop to think about it, this connection between bread and knowledge—or more broadly, between eating and learning—is a familiar concept. In our own language, these two are connected figuratively. “We sometimes refer to learning something as ‘taking it in,’ or ‘ruminating on it,’ or ‘chewing on it,’ ‘digesting’ an idea, and so on.”² Of course, the learning Jesus is referring to in his image of eating the bread of life is far more than just learning, than just taking in information. It is far deeper, far more personal. It is intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. And given the relationship to our earthly lives, also containing a physical, even existential, quality. It is a deeply rooted knowledge and understanding of God as the source of all life. Of God as the foundation of our being. As Paul says in describing God to the people of Athens, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28). A statement which,

interestingly, is a quote from a Greek philosopher-poet. Whether he knew it or not, bringing the connection with the *Logos* full circle. And bringing our pondering almost full circle.

So, what does this have to do with “taste and see that the Lord is good”? The whole idea of equating food with knowledge, particularly deep, mystical knowledge, was nothing new. This correlation was central to the Jewish Wisdom Tradition, the mystical core of Judaism. Generally speaking, Wisdom Tradition is defined as “a perennial or mystic inner core to all religious or spiritual traditions, without the trappings, doctrinal literalism, sectarianism, and power structures that are associated with institutionalized religion. The Wisdom Tradition provides a conceptual framework for the development of the inner self, living a spiritual life, and the realization of enlightenment or of union with God.”³ In Judaism—and by extension, Christianity—this Wisdom Tradition is contained within a collection of Old Testament books known as Wisdom Literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (Song of Songs), and in the Deuterocanonical book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. In some of these writings, Wisdom is personified as a woman, describing feminine images of the Divine. In some of these writings, Wisdom offers of her knowledge using the image of a feast: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Prov 9.5). An image of the Divine giving mystical knowledge through the imagery of a feast, of bread and wine, in which we Christians recognize the Eucharistic meal. In fact, after the invitation to communion—“The gifts of God for the People of God”—some priests will even add the statement “Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed are you who are called to his supper.”

It is through the Divine wisdom of God at the very core of our faith—what some of the ancients would refer to as rooted in mystical experiences of God—that we are nourished and sustained in our faith. Just as our physical bodies are nourished and sustained through the food we eat. For us Christians, Jesus Christ is the means by which we have access to this Divine wisdom. He is the means by which our faith is nourished and nurtured. Through his teachings, through the example of his life and ministry, and through the sacraments he instituted: Baptism and Eucharist. In the mystical tradition of our Jewish forebearers, this imparting of Divine wisdom is viewed as a feast. Just as we view the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly feast we will all one day share.

I will end with what is to me one of the best demonstrations of this idea of “taste and see that the Lord is good.” During the first year of my priesthood, at St. Alban’s Westwood, the rector and I were distributing the bread during communion. Near the center of the altar rail was a mother with a couple of boys, one on either side. The younger was probably 4 or 5, and the older about 6 or 7 years old. I was waiting for the next group of people to arrive at my side of the rail. While waiting, I watched the rector, Susan, give hosts, first to the younger boy, then to the mother, and then to the older boy. The younger boy just sort of looked at the host in his hand, not sure what to make of it. The older boy leaned behind his mother and said to his younger brother, “Eat it, Tristan. It’s good.” I couldn’t help but chuckle. That was probably one of the best statements of Eucharistic theology I have ever heard. Not from the writings of our greatest theological minds, but out of the mouth of babes. From a child who somehow understood, on a deeper level, just what was happening in a way we adults have lost. Never mind transubstantiation, consubstantiation, Real Presence, or any of that. We make Eucharist, we consume the Body of Christ, because it’s good. It’s good because of what it embodies—

God's love for us in the gift of his son, the gift of forgiveness of our sins, the gift of eternal life. All contained in the "bread of life," the Word made flesh. This Divine wisdom made part of who we are through our consumption of this "bread of life."

The Eucharist is part of our weekly witness of Jesus present among us. Present as the "bread of life." It is what nourishes us as we go from this place, to continue to be witnesses to the saving power of the Risen Christ with every fiber of our beings, spiritual and physical. In this simple, yet most mystical of acts—the Holy Eucharist—where we encounter the epitome of God's love for us. Where we indeed "taste and see that Lord is good."

¹ "Trust: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Eleventh Week after Pentecost," SALT, August 2, 2021.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/8/7/trust-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eleventh-week-after-pentecost>.

² Ibid.

³ "Wisdom Tradition," Wikipedia, January 29, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom_tradition.