

Bread of the World

I've mentioned here before that a lot of the television programs that Connie and I like are serialized in their format; that is, they tell an ongoing story. In order to be sure that the audience is continuing to track the story from week to week and to fill in those who might have missed a week, these shows often begin with a montage of clips from the program of the week before, introduced with one of the characters solemnly or excitedly saying, "Previously on (fill in the name of the show)..." I feel as if I should begin this sermon in that manner – "Previously in the Lectionary Gospel..." The passage I just read from John 6 clearly takes off from the passage we used last week in our Kaleidoscope Bible Study Process and the rest of this rather long chapter is also a further reaction to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. And, if you will cast your mind back to Sunday of two weeks ago, the odd bifurcated Gospel lesson from the Book of Mark which I used to discuss Jesus' leadership was the bookends to the same story as related in Mark. So, "Previously..."

Before I get into the Gospel story that we discussed together last week, I want to offer a few observations about our format for that discussion. First of all, I was both excited and dismayed by the conversation around the tables. I was excited by how you all entered into the conversation about the story with enthusiasm for the topic and respect for each other. I was dismayed because I couldn't be at all the tables and hear everything each of you said. I contented myself by wandering among the tables and catching snippets of each conversation. It seems to me that this was one of those occasions upon which the church is truly the church – each of us contributing what we have to share, each of us open to the wisdom offered by others, each of us helping to forge the bonds of love that bind us together as a family under God, as the Body of Christ in this place. I was asked at the end of our time together about the use of the technique of Mutual Invitation. Yes, it can seem awkward and unnecessary in a group where most of us know each other so well. But the fact is that some of us do still need to be asked before we will share; some prefer to listen while others are eager to share their thoughts. Mutual Invitation encourages everyone to share and to be what we want to be as the Body of Christ, we need everyone's opinions and insights. And because Mutual Invitation calls on each of us to remember who has spoken to a particular question and who has not, it encourages us to listen empathetically to each speaker rather than drowning out what they have to say with our own internal monologue preparing our next statement. Mutual Invitation helps us to remember that it is not only those who are most often in leadership roles among us who have something important to say about walking in the Way of Jesus. We are truly a nation of priests here in the Body of Christ.

I think that's especially important to consider as we touch again on the feeding of the five thousand. On one level, the story can be interpreted as God's continuing miraculous action to provide for God's people, a sort of extension to the story of the manna with which the Children of Israel were fed in the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land. The attribution in all of the four Gospels to such a miracle by Jesus is another confirmation of his role as the Messiah of God. But on another level, the story of this miracle points to the importance of each of us to the unfolding of the Kingdom of God, the formation of the Beloved Community. The catalyst of the miracle is the little boy and his offering of five loaves and two fishes. We might say that it is because of the faith of this child, perhaps the least important person in the crowd that day if we assign importance as the world does, because of his faith that the miracle takes place. His faith, it seems, was that Jesus would take his small gift and multiply it to fill the need and this is the kind of faith to which we are all called.

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But we might also interpret the miracle of the feeding in a completely different way. What if the little boy wasn't the only one who'd packed a lunch that day? What if there was always enough food hidden away in people's cloaks to feed them all and more but each was reluctant to share for fear that their meal, for which they'd made appropriate provision, would be swept away into the multitude who'd not prepared, leaving them without enough? What if the loving invitation of Jesus and the unselfish response of a child and the blessing of Jesus upon the thousands was enough to unlock their self-centered caution and turn it to the self-giving openhandedness that Jesus both taught and lived? Which, I wonder, was greater that day – the faith of the crowd in Jesus to answer their needs as God had answered in the wilderness or the faith of Jesus in the people of God to respond to their mutual need?

So, that's the "Previously," or at least part of it. We did not look at the whole lectionary passage last week, which also includes the story of Jesus walking on the water. I'm saving that story for a different time. And there is actually a gap in the lectionary between the end of that story and the beginning of our passage this morning. The gap reminds me of another old tradition of serial stories but it belongs to cinematic serials rather than those on television so you have to be a certain age to know about it. I remember when I was a boy, when the family was working together and finished a particular task or when a conversation among us would hit a natural lull, my father would remark, to no one in particular, "Meanwhile, back at the ranch..." Does anybody remember that phrase? It came from the old cowboy serials, shown at cinemas in the days when "goin' to the picture show" meant a double feature preceded by newsreels, cartoons, and adventure serials featuring Flash Gordon or Tom Mix and other cowboy stars. Even after the advent of talkies, there were often cards flashed on the screen at moments of transition. "Meanwhile, back at the ranch," may have never actually been seen on the big screen but it was a well-known cliché for those who remember that style of cliffhanger Western serial.

John 6:22-24 constitutes a "Meanwhile, back at the ranch..." moment. The people who had pursued Jesus and his disciples around the lake and been taught and fed had proceeded to spend the night at the site of their feeding. They awake in the morning to find Jesus gone, separately from his disciples. They prevail upon some boatmen who've just arrived to take them back to Capernaum and there, to their surprise, they find Jesus reunited with his disciples. This generates the question, "Rabbi, when did *you* get here?"

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus rarely answers a question with a direct answer. Instead, he always seems to answer the question behind the question. In this case, his answer implies that the questioners aren't fooling anybody. They're not looking for him so they can imbibe some more of his insightful teaching on God, which he gave them before he fed them as we heard two weeks ago. Instead, they're looking for another free lunch. They're glad to see him because their stomachs are empty again.

This is a happenstance with which I am not unfamiliar. When word gets out that you feed hungry folk, hungry folk show up. I hope I've learned enough from Jesus to be undismayed by this. When people are truly physically hungry, they are not much interested in the fine points or even the broad points of theology. You must feed them first, so they can hear your voice over the growling of their stomachs. Very often, once their physical need is addressed for the

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moment, they are gone until they are hungry again, or in my case, until the month is up before they can have another \$10 grocery card. But over the years, we've attracted here some folks who see in this place the possibility of another kind of feeding. Sometimes they come back just to talk, to be seen and heard as human beings rather than just as bums. Sometimes they come to be with people who are worshipping God. Sometimes they come to find out about different, deeper needs. They ask the same questions that were asked of Jesus. "How may I be made clean; how may I be healed?" Sometimes, it's "why would you people care about me? Does God really love me?"

The ones who come back, to talk or to worship, do so because they recognize the need in their lives for something other than the groceries they can get at the grocery store. They are looking for something to feed their souls, whether it's as simple as kindness and a listening ear or as profound as learning about the nature of God. That's not as common as we might hope in our society. It should seem pretty straight-forward to those of us who come to this place week after week, not to see and be seen as it is in so many parts of our country, but because this is our deepest community, because we take this "God stuff" seriously. But in many churches across our country, regular churchgoers as well as those who never darken the door of a church aren't really seeking the food that endures for eternal life. Instead, people are clamoring to feed their ever-growing appetites for "stuff;" not just food in quantities that are dangerous to health and wasteful but more clothes than they can wear, more cars than they can drive, houses that could shelter extended families, investment portfolios that they brood over, and so on and so on and so on.

In the main, the people of our world are no different than the Hebrews fleeing from Egypt or the good people of Capernaum. God gave manna and the Israelites said, "We're tired of this stuff." Jesus fed the multitude a dinner that satisfied them all – until the next day when they said, "When's lunch, Jesus?" They focused on the bread, not on the love that fed them. Are we sometimes guilty of this, too? Has God given us the desires of our hearts only to hear, "Thanks, God. Now, what I'd really like next is..." Are we seeking bread that does not satisfy?

When Jesus pointed out that the people he'd fed were doing this, they asked, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" It's the kind of question that makes good Protestant pastors today want to tear their hair out, if they have any. I think I'd say something like, "Do? What do you mean 'do'?" It's about faith, not works!" Jesus, of course is kinder and more patient than I. "Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." The secret lies not in our doing, not in our striving, not in our frantic activity, but in approaching life as Jesus did. That means trusting in God in all circumstances – when we are hungry, when we are tired, when we are frightened, when we are alone – and in sharing what we have without worry about what might be left to us. It means trusting in God's people to work together to feed each other. It means behaving in ways that we hope others will reciprocate, without any guarantees. Believing in Jesus means, as he said to his first disciples, following him.

The continuing quest to follow Jesus is what nourishes our daily lives. This is the way in which he becomes for us the Bread of Life. Taking the Way of Jesus, the lifestyle of Jesus, into our selves and making him part of our daily lives is how we eat the Bread of Life. In his commentary on this passage, Robert L. Salzgeber points out some important things about bread.

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We've grown accustomed in our time to bread made of highly processed white flour, with the bran and the wheat germ stripped out of it and preservatives added to keep it fresh tasting and fight mold. Of course, in doing this, we've also stripped most of the nutrients from the bread and added chemicals whose long-term effects we're only now beginning to understand. But in Jesus' time, as Salzgeber remarks, "they left the good stuff in their bread; the bran and the wheat germ. This is the part of the bread that spoils quickly, turning rancid and moldy. This kind of bread couldn't be kept without a great deal of preservatives, like white bread can be kept today. A loaf of white bread will keep in my refrigerator for well over a week. But in Jesus' day, and continuing even today in the Middle East, bread had to be baked fresh every morning. And if not eaten that same day, by nightfall the same bread would be hard, stale and the mold and fungus of decay would be already beginning its work."

As I read that description of bread, it reminds me that I must take the Bread of Life into me every day. Like manna, it can't be stored until tomorrow but requires each day's fresh application or it stales and I become hard, unyielding, a stone over which others can stumble rather than a participant in Christ Jesus, the Bread of Life that feeds the world. Without each day's fresh baking, I, too, turn rancid and moldy. The Bread of Life, which is Jesus, must be taken in every day – every day we must take up Jesus' mantle as members of the Body of Christ, so that we can be part of God's continuing creation and redemption and sustaining of the world around us. We, too, are part of the sustenance God has for the world.

That is why we eat bread together each month in memory of Jesus. Not simply because God gave manna and Jesus broke loaves and said "Take and eat." We eat the bread and drink the cup because we are called to remember what Jesus did, how he lived and what he said. In eating the bread and drinking the cup, we say to the world, "Look! We are taking Jesus into ourselves. We are still following him. We are still working, not for worldly success, but to be more and more like him. We seek each day to give our lives away, to diminish in our own lives, so that he might increase."

My brothers and my sisters, each of us move through this life with hearts that hunger, with hearts, as Augustine famously wrote, that are restless until they rest in God. We are all invited to Christ's banquet table today, not just for a morsel of bread and a sip of juice, but to symbolically take into ourselves the body and blood of Christ Jesus, our Savior. For he is truly the Bread of Life and in joining our lives to his in this deeply holy act, we act out the truth that we are part of him, we are the Body of Christ, and we will go into the world together to continue his work. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.