

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our Bread of Life summer school continues today, the second of five Sundays devoted to this theme that is spread out across the 6th chapter of John's Gospel. All three of our readings help us get at what Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples and the crowds that have been attracted to him, so I'm going to have a quick look at each of them, not quite in order.

Our first reading this morning we really could have had last week, because it is the background for understanding the significance of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. This is the story of the manna that God provided the people of Israel in the wilderness after liberating them from slavery in Egypt. I want us to notice a couple of things in this reading, first that it doesn't take long for the Israelites to start complaining about their new circumstances. "Sure, not being a slave is nice, but what about those fleshpots back in Egypt? We were eating meat there! And now we're in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to eat!" Now to be sure, they had been traveling for a while without food and water, and I will say that it has long bothered me that God was not more proactive with meeting that basic need for them. I mean, why did God have to wait until they were hangry before feeding them? After all, basic needs do need to be met before anything else can happen. In Maslow's famous hierarch of needs, physiological needs are at the bottom: air, water, food, heat, shelter, sleep, more or less in that order, all things we really cannot live without. Then again, there really is nothing that we humans won't complain about. Even after they get the manna in this story, they still continue to complain. It kept them alive, but eventually they got tired of it. I understand. So the idea that they were willing to entertain the possibility of returning to slavery for the sake of a more palatable menu is not too far-fetched. We make compromises like that in our own lives all the time, I think. We choose short-term pleasure over long-term wellbeing. It's why children fail the marshmallow test, and adults don't save enough for retirement.

The takeaway for our purposes is that God was the source of those basic needs for the people of Israel, and that is the tie-in to today's Gospel reading, which references the feeding of the five thousand that we had last week. In the most simple terms, the sign that Jesus provided was that he was being identified with God as the source of their basic needs, the "daily bread" he names in his prayer. That feeding, other words, was an indicator that he was doing God's work, indeed that he and the Father were one. No one came to Jesus asking him to feed the crowd. In fact, I don't think it would have occurred to any one that that was an option. But when he does it, the link to the Exodus story becomes obvious. "Who is this," they ask, "who can do such things?"

But that's not the end of the lesson Jesus is teaching. In fact, it's only the beginning. Because the physiological feeding, as important as it is, – and let's be clear that it is important, and so is the healing that Jesus has been doing before this. When you are sick it tends to take over your life and become your dominating reality. But as important as those physical needs are, they cannot be all there is to life.

And that's where Jesus is going with the bread of life idea today. The crowds from the feeding follow him when he moves on, and when they catch up to him in today's reading the deeper lesson can begin. "You came after me because I gave you some bread. But you missed that it was a *sign*. I'm pointing to something more profound and life-giving. I'm pointing you to

myself. I am the bread that you really need, the new and better thing that God has sent down from heaven to give life to the world.

So, they missed that sign, and now Jesus is helping them out with it. But there is something else going on in this text that is more “meta,” another level of meaning that takes this beyond a story about Jesus and his disciples two thousand years ago. This is about the early Christian community that John was writing to, which more and more was at odds with the Jewish context they grew out of. That animosity is something I’ll address another time. For now I’ll just say that if you are dismayed by the polarization in our society these days, it may help to realize that while this might seem new, or something we were getting past, it’s something that the earliest church went through in spades. But for today’s purposes what I want us to notice is that the significance of Jesus’ sign and his talk about being the bread from heaven is directly connected to the life of the church, specifically church’s practice of holy communion. For the community that John wrote this Gospel for, that connection would have been obvious. They would have congratulated themselves for getting what the people in the story aren’t yet grasping. “Every week we share the bread and remember that Jesus is our *true* bread. *That’s* what he means!” But what even John’s audience might not yet have appreciated is that this is about more than just identifying yourself with the right side; being on the right team or wearing the right colored hat. Jesus is drawing us into a new way of life, to a new reality, to a transformation of our hearts and minds. *That* is what our weekly celebration of communion is all about. It is receiving in, with, and under the bread and wine Jesus’ gift of himself, the promise that by his death and resurrection we are being freed from the powers of sin, death, and evil in our lives. They are not our masters any more. We Lutherans think that this works best when we don’t try to overanalyze what Holy Communion is. We shy away from talking about the sacrament as merely symbolic, as if our minds were really the only thing that needed to be fed. We also don’t presume to explain the inner working of Jesus’ bodily presence in the elements the way the medieval church did in the doctrine of transubstantiation, as if the supernatural “magical” aspect of the rite was the point. Instead, we focus on taking Jesus’ promise at face value: “This bread is my body, this wine is my blood.” And it is *for you*. We don’t pretend to know how that can be or how it works, only that Jesus meant what he said, and that in this eating we are joined to him, becoming what we receive, the body of Christ for the life of the world.

Our reading from Ephesians plays out the implications of all this a little more. Being joined to Christ is being joined to one another in the one body, the church. Lurking behind the call to unity in this text is the underlying reality that that is much easier said than done. We are all different from one another, with our own experiences, our own opinions, and our own wills. And that is often a recipe for disaster, a formula for disunity and polarization. But this is not a body of our own creation. It is the body of Christ, and God is at work here in this body to use our differences in the service of the whole. Because this is Christ’s body that we are joined to, it is his work that we attend to. And that work is faith, more precisely, it is nurturing the gift of faith that God alone can give, faith that trusts in God’s provision, faith that is confident in God’s love, and faith that transforms our wills so that we joyfully become extensions of God’s provision and God’s love on behalf of others.

May we feast on this good news today and be nourished and built up by its promise of life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.