

August 2nd, 2015 – Pentecost 10

“Eating the Faith” – Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Exodus 14, John 6

“*I am the bread of Life*”, Jesus says to the crowds in our reading. The crowds are chasing Jesus from one side of the lake to the other. A couple weeks ago, we saw the same thing in the Gospel of Mark. This most recent mob scene is right after the feeding of the 5,000. Now the 5,000 want more, and Jesus knows it. **26)** *Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”* To put it another way, Jesus is saying, “*I gave you bread, and now you want more.*”

This story is really a story about trust; it is a story about understanding the deeper nature of God and therefore our relationships with one another. It is, as it often is, all about us.

Eating, sharing food, breaking bread together is a universal act of welcome, friendship and trust. There are many cultures around the world where, if you refuse to eat the food given you, you can cause grievous insult toward the family and permanent exclusion for yourself. In most of the Middle East, this is true. It is also true in the Far East, in most of South America, in Native American cultures. People will respect foods you absolutely cannot eat, but they will not respect not breaking bread with them because you are a picky eater, you don’t like something or you are just not hungry. I learned this in an anthropology class in college, and it has stuck with me ever since. Since this is such an omnipresent cultural assumption, I try very hard to eat what I have been given when I am a guest at a person’s house, because there is no real way to know what will be considered an insult and what will not.

There are all kinds of very deep things going on which reach far, far back into our deepest collective memories when we share a meal with one another. Think of Abraham and the three visitors. The first thing he does is run back to his house to tell Sarah to start making a meal now. As the book of Hebrews says, we do not know when we may be entertaining angels at your table. **2)** *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* Or remember Joseph with his brothers, the ones who had so wronged him by selling him into slavery and then passing him off as dead to their father. When the brothers come to Egypt looking for food during the famine, Joseph gives them grain to bring home and then forgives his family and brings them to live with him. Or what about the father of the prodigal son? What does the father do when his son returns, after he runs out to greet him? He throws a feast.

These Biblical meals are acts of invitation, forgiveness and trust. Sharing a meal with others is an act which mirrors the acts of God’s love, forgiveness and trustworthiness toward us. And so this story today is a recasting of the story of the Manna in the desert. The Israelites are complaining, a little like the crowd today. The crowd says, “*Give us more, because that is what we want, what we need!*” The Israelites said, “*Even though we were slaves in Egypt, we need more out here because we are going to die if we don’t get what we think we need.*” God provides for the Israelites abundantly, but with a strong caveat. *Do not gather more than you can eat in a day.* He feeds them as a test of their ability to trust in the source of their provision, God and God alone. Jesus does a similar thing, but rather than more bread, he presents himself. **35)** *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

The act of eating, the act of sharing a meal, when we see it through the lens of God's work in the desert and Jesus' words to the crowd, is always about trusting God's care of us. Provision and fulfillment always begin in the trust of God. And it is also where it breaks as well. We break our trust in God and threaten that trust in others when we do not act from this place of fulfillment and provision in God.

What do I mean by this? I mean wherever we are not providing for others in the way God provides for us, we threaten the only work all of us ever need to really do. As Jesus says in today's reading, **29** *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."* The only work Jesus calls us to is to believe. It is stunning how hard that actually is, isn't it?

Here is the thing, though: when people are starving, we cannot say to them, *"Just believe in God and Christ and all will be well."* Eating is always a community event, even if we are eating alone or just with our families. It used to be that the food we ate came from the farm just outside of town – the eggs were delivered from the farmer along with the milk, the vegetables might have been from your neighbor's backyard, the meat might be from the hog you bought at the beginning of the year down at the hog farm in the next town over. Our food was *close*, and we ate close to where our food was grown until just recently, as little as 40 years ago.

This was true even in cities. I remember when the eggs and milk were delivered at my grandmother's house in Washington, DC. I remember visiting the farm they were from. I was only 4 or 5 at the time, but I was able to visit the place where the food I ate was grown. I am sure many of you have even closer memories.

Now that our food is from all over the place, we have lost much of that sense of closeness, and I would argue we've also lost that community sensibility about our meals, together or apart. Regardless, food and the sharing of a meal is still a community event. And therefore, it is a communal act of trust.

When this trust is broken, we undermine the only true work we are called to – to believe in Him whom the Father has sent. Unfed people means broken trust; and broken trust means discontent and disbelief.

I hope now, from that perspective, we can have a little more sympathy for the crowd and for the Israelites. It can be hard for many of us, because we are well-fed. We do not feel insecure about our next meal, most of us. But the statistics are more than a little disturbing, especially in Maine.

According to the USDA, 15.1 percent of Maine households, or more than 200,000 people, are food insecure, which means they lack access to enough food to ensure adequate nutrition. The state ranks 17th in the nation and first in New England for food insecurity. About 18 percent of Maine people used food stamps in January 2014, while 36 percent of Maine's food insecure population earns too much to qualify for SNAP and instead rely on charity food assistance, much like the weekly meal at the church.
<http://bangordailynews.com/2015/07/21/homestead/bangor-church-serves-weekly-meal-for-those-in-need/>

15 percent. Let that number sink in.

How big is our community? When you think of our community of faith, how many people do you think of?

Notice that one of the big issues is what is called '*food insecurity*'. That means the food available is not fulfilling, is not nutritious. Now, we can make this about them, those who hunger. We can politicize the issue and take our stances and do all kinds of maneuvering, but the fact remains – one in seven people are unfulfilled on a basic survival level, just in our state, just in our community.

There are resources and ways to overcome this and we as a church are involved in a couple of them. But I want to focus on the deeper aspect for now. We can always *do* more. But I think this whole discussion today speaks to who we are. It is the primary issue for the Israelites, and it is the primary issue for the crowd.

What is God's answer to the people in the desert? Yes, God answers the prayer for more food, but he also calls them to obedience, or trust. The deeper issue for the Israelites is a lack of trust, and as a result, the people do not know themselves.

Because the question is: who are the Israelites, and who does God know them to be? The Israelites are God's chosen, free people who have been called to be a beacon to the world. They are meant to shine brightly *because they trust completely in God*. So will the Israelites think of themselves as – enslaved, starving, empty people sick with nostalgia; or who God knows them to be – free, unchained, chosen people who are called to free, unchain and instill belief for others?

What is Jesus' answer to the crowds? Yes, Jesus has given them bread and given it abundantly, but he also calls them to something more fulfilling - a relationship with the living God who took on flesh for our sake. The deeper issue for the crowd is the consuming power of personal need, and as a result, the people no longer know themselves outside of their wants.

Because the question is: who is the crowd, who are we, and who does Jesus know us to be? We are those who believe in a living God who has sent us abundant life now and eternal life always. We are those who are freed from the needs of self in order to provide for the needs of others. We are those who are *worthy of the gifts from heaven because we are the ones who believe completely in the one whom the Father has sent for us*. So shall we think of ourselves like the crowd in the story today – enfolded into our physical needs so deeply we cannot see the deeper truths of the world around us; or who Jesus knows us to be – the free and beloved creation of the living God to whom the bread of life, Jesus, has been sent for our sake, people worthy to be raised up with Christ, now and in the future.

It is a high vision God and Christ have of us. Where we do not choose to live into that great vision, trust is broken. The community suffers. The people are no longer fulfilled. They begin to literally go hungry. The vision God and Christ have of us is beautiful, though, and worth sharing.

So when we eat, when we break bread together, here in this place where we proclaim God's love and salvation, we are eating not just bread and drinking not just juice, but we are eating the very depths of our faith. This is why we say, "*This is the bread of life, the very body of Christ, the very center of our faith. Take and eat.*"

The Prophet Isaiah puts the vision this way:

54:9) *"This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you.*

10) *For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*

Isa 55

1) *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

2) *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.*

3) *Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.*

4) *Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.*

5) *Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.*

We have been glorified by the Lord through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what it means to live a sacramental life. And so we come to the table, to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be fulfilled by the faith we share with one another, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We eat deeply to remember the source of this simple bread and this simple cup – God and God's Son, Jesus Christ.