

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Tom E. King - August 2nd, 2015

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." **John 6:24-35***

When I retired as rector of Grace Church in Lexington, North Carolina, one of the parishioners gave me a copy of Thomas Jefferson's New Testament. You probably know that Jefferson took issue with many New Testament passages, especially in the Gospels. If Jefferson thought a particular passage was a bit outlandish or unacceptable he took his scissors and cut the passage from the page. Needless to say, his version of the New Testament was a bit thin compared to the typical versions you and I have.

As I was reading the Gospel lesson for today I began to wonder how thin the Gospels would be if we removed all references to Jesus either eating or talking about food. Like Thomas Jefferson's version, this volume would be quite thin as well.

At times we see Jesus eating at a campfire on the beach; at times in a private room with his disciples; at times in the fine home of a shaker and mover in the community; at times in the homes of tax collectors, prostitutes, and Gentiles. Often there is mystery associated with his eating and drinking: why would he eat with these people? Why would he have social intimacy with people so many folks consider unworthy and unacceptable? Why would he eat with religious authorities when so many of them are out to get him? What is he talking about when he chats with the woman at the well or when he refers to his body as spiritual food?

In the Gospel lesson for today we hear Jesus talking about break and mystery again: I am the bread of life that came down from heaven. Just like the food God provided our ancestors in the wilderness, I am here to reveal mysterious nourishment to all who wish to receive it. And if you receive it, you will not be hungry or thirsty for spiritual things again.

We are okay to that point. We are familiar and comfortable with the image of Jesus as the bread of life, as the light of the world. But none of us could raise our hand and say, "Because of my faith in Jesus I have never been spiritually hungry again." In fact, the opposite is true. Just as the

collect for today implies, the journey of faith is one of perpetual seeking. We never get to the point that we are full, that we have all the knowledge and spiritual certainty we need.

In the teachings of Jesus, especially as they are told to us in the 4th Gospel, there is always another layer of meaning beyond the obvious. Even familiar symbols of bread and wine and water and light have deeper meanings. At times the deeper meaning jumps out at us like the words in a poem or a piece of art; at other times we have to wait for the meaning to come to us. And at times, we need someone like Nathan who pointed the way for King David through a story.

As Jesus talked to people who got his message, and as we hear King David waking up when the truth slapped him in the face, we see a similar picture: in both cases a spiritual enlightenment happened, even if just for a moment. Like a light bulb going on, scales falling from peoples' eyes, things lining up in their minds in a way they could understand things they did understand just a few minutes earlier.

During the years I worked as a therapist and family counselor, it was wonderful to see the light go in someone's eyes, to see a family discover a better way to communicate or work together on a difficult problem. It was like they had been working in a dimly-lighted room and suddenly someone found a switch on the wall that would illuminate the entire room.

I think this is what Jesus is talking about when he tells people that he offers them the bread of life, something special, something unlike the typical resources for daily living. In ancient literature, eating bread is symbolic of taking something into one's awareness. Jesus is using an ancient symbol to tell people that his message has to be taken in, digested, incorporated into their full view of themselves and the world.

When Jesus tells people that they will not hunger or thirst again spiritually if they follow him, I think he is telling them they will never again have to wonder where the water well and the bread table are located. He is not saying that their spiritual hunger and thirst will be satisfied once and for all. But once the light goes on and they understand what it is like to find God within themselves, they will always know where to come for spiritual nurture.

It is no wonder that the Jewish people, with stories of wandering in a desert and being hungry and thirsty, placed food and drink at the center of their Passover observances. These symbols were reminders that God had saved them from slavery and from starvation.

It is no wonder that Jesus and the early people of the way saw these images in the Passover meal and gave new meaning to the familiar customs of an ancient ritual.

It is no wonder that the early church made the Eucharist part of their worship every Sunday. At some level they knew there was more going on here than bread and wine, eaten in remembrance of Jesus.

It is no wonder that the church has been confused about how to understand this meal. For centuries part of the church has taught that the bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus for this holy meal. Consuming the elements of communion was seen as the means by which God's grace is imparted to the people. No communion, no grace; no grace, no salvation. Other parts of the church have taught that these familiar foods of bread and wine are merely symbols representing Jesus' body and blood, reminders of his death. And other opinions abound.

However you feel about the bread and wine as they relate to the body and blood of Jesus, we typically see beyond the imagery to the mystery they represent. We understand that coming to the table with our hands outstretched for bread and wine has something to do with welcoming God's grace, God's character into our own lives.

There is no magic at this table. But there is a powerful opportunity to receive and incorporate the grace of God that is about us always. If we have open minds and open hearts, we will find God's grace already within us, waiting for the opportunity to enrich and nourish our lives. But if we

don't pay attention; if we do not make room for spiritual matters to expand us and enrich us, we are likely to walk right past them and not notice them at all.

Rev. Tom E. King