

What Feeds You?

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC on August 9, 2015 (Proper 14, Year B)

In case you've been on vacation or just not following the Gospel readings the past several weeks, Jesus has been talking a lot about bread. We've been immersed in the sixth chapter of John; in fact, we are in the middle of it right now. It all started two weeks ago with the feeding of the 5,000 from a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and it will continue two more weeks after today before we go back to Mark's Gospel for the rest of this season of the church year.

As I pondered this particular passage from John's Gospel, as well as some of my travels the past two weeks, the same questions kept coming back to me: How are we fed? What are our sources for nourishment and sustenance?

Yes, you may think immediately about Harris-Teeter or Food Lion or even your favorite restaurant. Or you may think about something unrelated to food, like being on the beach or the river or a long run or a warm cup of tea and a good book. Or maybe it's the way you give back to others that provides sustenance for you.

If we take a long look at this epic chapter of John, we find that Jesus is dealing with people who don't really know what it means to be fed. He did the Loaves and Fish miracle, and their stomachs were fed. But when they were empty again, there was frustration on both sides (Jesus and the people) because Jesus quickly, and deftly, offered them something more lasting and filling, even if it wasn't physical. And as people often do, they rejected what Jesus had to offer. Jesus so wants to be the bread that fills their souls, and they just don't get it.

In today's episode, Jesus begins to have a bit of a confrontation with some of the religious leaders of the area. "How can he say 'I came down from heaven?' We know this boy! We know his parents! Who does he think he is?" They don't seem to take offense at Jesus being the bread of life, but coming down from heaven? That might be a stretch for them to grasp.

Jesus then talks about those who come to him are "drawn by the Father," and that no one comes to him without being drawn. This begs questions to which I don't necessarily have answers except to say that there is plenty of evidence in Scripture, especially in the Gospels, that God wants to be in relationship with all of humanity and that God will make that happen in ways and time that aren't really ours to worry about.

And that's the Good News I take from this passage: That God desires to be close to us, and that closeness is lived out in how we know Jesus in our lives. It's not our religious experience or where we are born or our economic status that determine where and how we know Jesus. It doesn't come from any amount of study, pondering, or reasoning or insight. Our relationship with God through Jesus comes because God wants to be in relationship with us.

But that relationship, and our experience with God, needs nurturing and growth. And that growth isn't fostered in a vacuum. It requires community to grow and bear fruit. Jesus never said, "You can do this 'Follow me' thing on your own." When we make Jesus the center of that community, and remember that he said, "I am the bread of life," we will continue to find our spiritual nourishment in surprising and unexpected places.

Two weeks ago, I was at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in downtown Boston. It's not on the tourist maps or on the Freedom Trail, but it's right there in the middle of it all, right down the hill, behind the Massachusetts State House, just off of the Boston Common. St. Paul's Cathedral is on the other side of Common, and in a shared ministry between the two parishes, they host a meal each Monday where about 100 or so people gather for a hot, healthy meal. For many, it

may be the only real meal they eat all day. But MANNA, as the ministry is called, feeds way more than their stomachs. Prior to the noon meal, there is a community meeting, to which anyone in the homeless community, even those who have gained stable housing, gather to share their stories as well as trials and tips for living without permanent housing. Following the meal, many of the participants gather for Eucharist in the same space.

I have seen many homeless shelters and ministries in my life. But I have never seen one that promoted the type of community that Jesus calls each of us to be active in, a community that actively seeks to feed people's bodies as well as their souls, to nourish their spiritual and emotional needs as well. It didn't happen in a fancy building or in a secluded restaurant. It didn't even happen on a lush lawn. It happened in a basement, a holy space where people who saw a need responded to God's call, and people who had a need, both for food and community, responded to God's invitation to be a part of that community.

When our group of 10 high schoolers and 4 adults were asked to reflect on our experience at MANNA and what we saw and where we were fed by this experience, we didn't talk about the joy of setting up and breaking down tables. We didn't talk about the triumph of scrubbing pots and pans and emptying the garbage. We talked about the conversations we had with people over lunch (and before and after lunch, too), people who were created in the image of God just like you and I are, people who may not have had the best hand in life dealt to them, but who are seeking to walk with Christ, and people whom God is seeking to be in relationship with. It's amazing what happens when you have conversations with people, even if you are a very temporary part of that community. You find things you have in common, from a shared love of a non-Boston sports team to a realization that if a few things had fallen differently, your life and this person's life could have been in opposite places.

What we found was what mattered most – that all too often, we let our own “stuff,” emotional, physical, material “stuff,” try to give us nourishment and sustenance. And it can't. No matter how hard we try or how much more get, it cannot take the place of the One who is the Bread of Life. Maybe it's because we like our deity's high and lifted up, distant and maybe even exclusively in heaven, and God comes to be among us in the person of Jesus, offering us the bread of life. God dares to be made vulnerable in the holiest of efforts to unite people and bring them into closer community and relationship with God and one another. We so often want religion to make us feel better about ourselves, not something that is so uncomfortably incarnational. Bishop Will Willimon writes, “Our culture is a vast supermarket of desire. Can it be that our bread, our wine, our fulfillment stands before us in the presence of this crucified, resurrected Jew? Can it be that many of our desires are, in the eternal scheme of things, pointless? Might it be true that Jesus is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek?”¹

So what it is that feeds you? From where or whom do you get your nourishment and sustenance? Is it from the stuff of that vast supermarket of desire, things that will eventually leave you empty and wanting more? Or do you seek nourishment from being in community with imperfect people, centered around the one who is the Bread of Life, people who are walking a similar path, who have something to teach you, and who are seeking to learn from you as well?

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2