

“Bread from Heaven”
John 6:51-58
Sunday, August 16, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

The story is told of a man who once asked God, “What does a billion dollars mean to you who are all powerful?”

“Hardly a penny,” God said.

Then the man asked God , “And what are a thousand centuries to you?”

God answered “Hardly a second!”

Thinking he had God backed into a corner, the man then said, “Then if that's the case, O Lord, give me a penny!”

“Sure,” God replied. “In a minute.”

Wisdom isn't about outsmarting God, is it? Wisdom is about living in and with God. Wisdom is about being in Christ and surrounded by Christ. Wisdom is about eating and drinking from the feast that God prepares for us.

I. Take Communion.

Today we conclude a few Sundays in the sixth chapter of John. Jesus talks a lot about bread in this chapter. And so we've been talking a lot about bread, and how Jesus uses bread as a metaphor to teach the crowds about himself. We have wrestled with the simple yet profound truth of the Incarnation. Jesus is bread from heaven. He is not of this world. And yet he chose to live in this world, to become a part of this world, for our sakes. He is God-with-us, God-in-the-flesh. A simple, yet profound, mystery.

I'd like to share a beautiful Communion story with you. It's about a Methodist pastor by

the name of Thomas Pettepiece.

“[Pettepiece] was a political prisoner, a prisoner of conscience. Pettepiece writes of his first Easter Sunday spent in prison. He was among 10,000 prisoners. Most of the men had lost everything: their homes, their jobs, their furniture, their contact with their families. It was Easter Sunday, and they wanted to celebrate Communion. But, they had no cup for Communion. They had no wine for Communion. They didn't even have water for Communion. Nor did they have any bread for the Sacrament.

“So, they practiced the Communion of Empty Hands. ‘This meal in which we take part,’ Pettepiece said, ‘reminds us of the imprisonment, the torture, the death and final victory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bread is the body which he gave for humanity. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The wine, which we don’t have today, is his blood, and represents our dream of a united humanity, of a just society, without difference of race or class.’

“Then Pettepiece, the pastor, held out his empty hand to the next person on his right, and passed on the imaginary loaf. Each one took a piece and passed it on. Then he said, ‘Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And together they ate the imaginary bread, trying to imagine tasting it.

“After a moment they passed around the non-existent chalice, each imagining he was drinking from it. ‘Take, drink, this is the blood of Christ which was shed for you ... Let us give thanks, sure that Christ is here with us, strengthening us.’

“They gave thanks to God and then stood up and embraced each other. And a while later, one of the non-Christian prisoners came up to them and said, ‘You people have something special, which I would like to have.’ And the father of a girl who had died came up to Pettepiece

and said, ‘Pastor, this was a real experience. I believe that today I discovered what faith is ...’” (Alex Gondola, Jr. -- from Visions of a World Hungry, quoted in A Guide To Prayer, Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, editors, The Upper Room, p. 143).

We may, at times, think that we do not understand Communion. We may even feel, at times, that we do not want to participate in Communion, for a variety of reasons. Regardless, we can know that, if we choose to partake, Jesus is present, and His miraculous love transforms us. Eating the bread and sharing the cup at the Lord’s Table is “a real experience.”

II. “Take all of me,” part 1.

Jesus wants us to “take all of Him,” to receive every good gift He has to offer us, and to accept the pain that sometimes comes with being His followers.

Jesus is the bread of life, the eternal bread come down from heaven. In the gospel of John, Jesus repeats this concept over and over again. “I am the living bread,” He says (v. 51).

The repetition is a sign that this concept is crucially important. It is also a sign that this concept is difficult to comprehend. Jesus is aware that what He is saying goes against the grain of our human understanding. And so He repeats Himself, until we hopefully get it. He is showing us a world that is rich and deep and complex. The mystery of it is not what we are used to in our modern society.

The gospel of John is training us to see “the multi-layered reality” of the incarnation. “The Word became flesh and lived among us,” John writes in the very first chapter of his gospel. This is such a difficult concept for us. We are looking for religious and spiritual truths. Jesus says: the truth is life in this world; the truth is being in this earthly “flesh;” the truth is existence in this physical reality. God meets us here, where we are, in the thick of things. Jesus says, “...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v. 53).

Incarnation becomes offensive at this point. We may need to eat bread to survive; we may need blood in order to keep our hearts pumping and our organs functioning. But this too-vivid language about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking Jesus' blood? -- It's too much!

For Jews, it's doubly offensive, since Jewish law forbids the drinking of animal blood. Jesus most certainly angers his Jewish audience with these horrifying images of human flesh and blood.

In vv. 53 and 54, Jesus says that the flesh and the blood of the Son of Man must be ingested in order to be raised up on the last day. So, we are to do more than simply follow Jesus; we are to consume Him.

Jesus demands total engagement.

We cannot sit dispassionately in the pew and reflect on Jesus intellectually. We are required to come forward, rip off a piece of bread, dip it in the juice, chew it and gulp it down.

The concept is reminiscent of Paul, who writes in Galatians 2:20, "...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Through chewing the bread and swallowing the juice, we become the Church, the body of Christ, the community of His love on earth.

Jesus wants us to take all of Him. Eat His flesh. Drink His blood. Consume Him.

Will Willimon writes:

"Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deep within us, to consume us as we consume him, to flow through our veins, to be digested, to nourish every nook and cranny of our being."

III. "Take all of me," part 2.

What would it take for each of us to say to Jesus, "Take all of me?" He wants us to take all of Him; this is what Communion symbolizes. As we take Communion, we express our desire

to take all of him.

In the same way, Jesus wants to take all of us. When we eat the bread and share the cup, we commit ourselves to giving all that we are to Jesus, to being in Him as He is in us.

This is deep, mysterious, tricky stuff. Hard to comprehend. That's why Jesus keeps saying it over and over again. He knows we can't possibly get it on the first go 'round. But as we keep reading the Word, as we keep participating in Communion, as we continue to be a part of Christ's Church, we slowly learn how to abide in Christ as Christ abides in us. We slowly learn that Jesus is the bread of life, the bread from heaven, as He says (vv. 35 & 58).

There's an old story about a minister walking along the ocean with his young son. The little boy questions his father about Sunday's sermon. He says, "Dad, I cannot understand how Christ can live in us and we live in him at the same time." Further down the beach, the father notices an empty bottle with a cork in it. Taking the bottle, he half fills it with water, re-corks it and flings it out into the ocean.

As they watched the bottle bob up and down he says, "Son, the sea is in the bottle and the bottle is in the sea. It is a picture of life in Christ. You live under the Lordship of Christ and He lives in you."

I am so grateful to God that I am a part of this Christian community, this body of Christ, where I eat the bread and drink the juice, where Jesus lives with us in our real, gritty, earthly, daily grind of sweat and tears and challenge and sorrow and disappointment; and amazing love and joyous celebration and a peace that passes all earthly understanding. You and I know that Jesus is the truth – the living Word of God. Because we eat this bread, we have hope. We know that God in Christ Jesus is about the business of saving and renewing the whole earth, the whole universe, the whole of humanity – you and me included.

Closing.

It's not always easy. In fact, life in Jesus can be challenging, even dangerous.

There's an Irish saying that goes like this:

“The person who speaks the truth should have one foot in the stirrup.” He should be ready to ride off at once. People do not like the truth, especially when it challenges their attitudes; and the reaction is often to try to destroy the evidence of the truth or the one who witnesses to it. (Father Gerry Pierse)

Do you want all that Jesus has to offer you? Are you ready to offer all of yourself to Jesus? When He says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,” this is what he is talking about. He comes to claim the whole world, and all that is in it, for himself. He comes to claim you, for now and for all eternity. Praise God for “the [living] bread that came down from heaven.”

Amen.