
I am the Bread of Life

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A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser

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,"

After completing an interim position in New Jersey, I moved to Atlanta. Before I joined the Cathedral staff ten years ago, I served for nine months as the Associate Rector of St. Patrick's Church in Dunwoody. The worship in that church was far different than anything I had experienced before. There was a version of Q and A during the reading of the scripture lessons, in kind of an extended Bible study. Everyone held hands during the Lord's Prayer, and the music was far more contemporary than anything I had experienced in the Episcopal Church. But the congregation was warm and embracing, and they had a very deep commitment to outreach, both in their neighborhood and in the city. This included being part of the feeding ministry at the Peachtree Pine Homeless Shelter, a ministry which we at the Cathedral have also been part of. One on occasion I was invited to join them to celebrate the Eucharist at the Shelter, and then to help share in feeding the folks there with the meal provided by the parish. There in the midst of hundreds of hungry and homeless folk, we shared the bread of the Eucharist and the bread of the dining table. It was a moving experience that I still remember. For perhaps the first time, I understood anew what the Israelites must have felt when God fed Elijah in the wilderness, when the Lord spoke to Moses and he gave the people manna to eat, and when Jesus broke the bread of the Passover with his disciples on the night before he died.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good," writes the psalmist.

One of the problems in comprehending what this Gospel story means is the widespread but I think false impression all about spiritual things. People are no longer religious but spiritual (which means they no longer go to church). The stuff of ordinary life will no longer do. We want to raise above all that, to go higher. As modern, scientific people, we have learned much about everything we can taste, and touch and feel. Traditional church life and worship is no longer relevant to many. In our search to figure everything out, in trying to reduce matters of faith to a laundry list of behavioral do's and don'ts perhaps we have lost the center, the mystery of it all. Some of us don't want our religious life and experience reduced to a tweet, and all explained in neat catchy phrases. Some of us yearn to peek behind the veil, to observe the less obvious, to be part of something that is not man-made but divine.

Today's Gospel reading opens with one of those wonderful "I am" statements. In John's Gospel, which at times feels more like Greek philosophy than Biblical discovery, Jesus pull back the veil and declares, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." "I am the light of the world." And in today's passage, "I am the bread of life." Remember how John's Gospel began: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Unlike the Synoptic Gospels which tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry, John paints a big and eloquent picture about who God is, and how Jesus has made God known. The key to all of these Biblical readings about bread and being fed is of course that bread was a pure gift for the followers of Yahweh and of Jesus. They didn't make it, or work for it or pay for it—it was just there. The bread was a sign of God's love for them, and of course of God's call to relationship with them. And since it was so clearly a gift, they were able to see that the thing, the bread, meant far more than what it was all by itself. Just like all real gifts do.

When Jesus fed the 5000 on the hillside, he took two loaves and five fish, and there was enough for everyone, with baskets full left over. The story is of course one about abundance, for when God blesses the action, there is always more than enough. When the bread and wine on the altar are offered, blessed, broken and given, we know that this is more than bread, and more than wine. We too are invited to share in the "gifts of God, meant for the people of God." When we look with awe and reverence upon something as simple as a thin, rather tasteless wafer, we know it to be a sign, symbol, and presence of something much greater than a little flour and water.

When Jesus invites us to his meal, is it an invitation to a picnic, or a sacrifice or a last supper? Perhaps we are not invited to understand fully; we are simply invited to be fed, holding out our hands to receive what it has pleased God to put into them. Like holy manna, it is neither the meal we had planned nor even the meal we would have thought to want, but it is the meal God has given us, the very bread of heaven.

The Post-Communion Prayer we say after receiving Communion is our thank you note. In it we praise God for showing us such gracious hospitality, but we also recognize that we have been fed for a reason. "Send us now into the world in peace." "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." This is now our jog description. Having shared in this royal priesthood in worship, we are sent forth to exercise it in our lives, loving and serving the Lord. We are pulled away from our beautiful altar and our safe Cathedral space and pointed toward an open door. It's not a door to another part of the Church, but it is the door into the world, where Christ may yet be found and followed and served. The last thing we say in church sums up our response to such good news: "Thanks be to God."

We are all aware that we seem to be living in a world of scarcity not abundance. There doesn't seem to be enough food or money or affordable mortgages or health care nor dare I say courage, to go around. All non-profit organizations have suffered mightily during these past few years, since our economic system teetered on the brink of collapse. This week even the Atlanta Symphony warned it's subscribers that things were dire in negotiations between management and the musicians, and that the deficit had grown to an alarming figure. The Church has also not been immune from the problem. Here at the Cathedral we too have suffered financially. We have had to cut outreach and mission allocations, in order to balance the budget without cutting staff further. That is why it is imperative that those of us, who can provide, do provide. This month St. Anne's Guild is setting an example for us all by spearheading again our collection of food for the Buckhead Christian Ministry, a ministry we helped found more than twenty years ago. Perhaps it only takes courageous and bold leaders to say, yes there is enough for all, if we can truly understand the story of the loaves and fishes. We do understand and we are going to make this happen. On this Sunday I invite each of us to pledge to God and to ourselves that in appreciation for the gifts that God has given to us, and above all for the gift of the bread of life, we too will share our gifts with those in need, be they in our neighborhood or far beyond.

Jesus is God's manna in the wilderness, the one who reminds us day by day that we live because God provides not what we want, but what we need: some bread, some wine, some friendship and love, and a relationship with this man Jesus, who comes from heaven to bring life to the world.