

Proper 14, Year B, 8/9//09*John 6:35,41-51***Jesus the Living Bread**

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The topic of today’s Gospel reading, as it is for several weeks running, is Jesus the living bread, which evokes memories for me. In the 60’s and 70’s I lived for nine years in San Diego. One of my favorite vacation destinations in those days was the high desert – particularly Borrego Springs. The trip there took only a matter of a few hours as I drove past another couple of places I really loved to see: Julian, a little village with several restaurants that specialized in serving apple pie and cider, and Santa Ysabel, which boasted a bakery, Dudley’s, that attracted folks from many miles around for their bread. Believe me, the reputation was deserved. And I gather by my Internet exploration that it is still attracting just as many people today.

It may be that man cannot live by bread alone, or woman either for that matter, but there really is something about both the taste and aroma – and even the texture – of freshly baked bread. Anyone who has lived near a bakery knows what I mean about the aroma. It can be as beguiling as the sirens were to poor Ulysses. I have a friend who spent a couple of weeks in a small resort town on the coast of Portugal. When I asked her what the most memorable thing about her stay was, without any hesitation her response was, “the bread.” She could hardly wait to get up each morning to get a loaf of the wonderful bread they had just baked. In that culture, bread is just as much a staple of existence as it was in Jesus’ world.

So I think I can understand the evocative quality of the reference to bread throughout these readings we’re having. Furthermore, if you’ve ever eaten in an Ethiopian restaurant, you will know that bread in such a culture serves as far more than merely a way to sop up the gravy. The bread of the sort you would have found in the Mediterranean world of Jesus’ day, just like the bread in Ethiopian restaurants today, served as a way to pick up and consume other food with. Remember, for example, Jesus identifying Judas as his betrayer by referring to the person to whom he hands a piece of bread he has dipped into what appears to have been a common pot.

Bread is obviously important in that sort of world, but it is in our own, too. Moreover, as essential as it is to us – unless, of course, we’re hooked on the Atkins Diet – and as evocative as its qualities – especially aroma – are, bread in this series of readings also stands in for all the hunger, both physical and spiritual, that consumes us, and the food, physical and spiritual, that sustains and even enriches us, whatever our culture. Jesus continues to remind us over and over again throughout the Gospel of John that he has

come to change our natural understanding of the way things work in our world – figuratively at least, to turn our world upside down. Of course, it is important to us as Christians to hear the words that assure us that Jesus is the bread that has come from heaven and that by eating it we may have eternal life. That is, we do need to cling to him and to place our faith in him. But these Gospel passages ask us to do far more than that.

First, let's note how deeply Jesus probes into our humanity, how well he understands our yearnings. We need to eat everyday – well, maybe not *me*; I could do with a break from eating, I'm afraid – but *most* of us. That simple fact is symbolized beautifully by the hunger generated by even the *aroma* of freshly baked bread. In Exodus, we read about the manna that God sent to quell the hunger of the Israelites in their desert trek. It was to be consumed, however, only on the day they found it. In fact, it would spoil after that day, thereby discouraging anyone from hoarding it. Its purpose was to save lives, not to give anyone an advantage over another. Just so, in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, we are to ask only for “daily bread.”

But there is a yearning far deeper than that in our souls for a reassurance that we are loved and that we really are God's adopted children, and, although we might not use, or even recall, the words of our baptism, that we are truly, as the baptismal formula assures us, “sealed as Christ's own forever.” And *that* is what Jesus is trying to tell us. He is here to satisfy that far greater hunger. We *are* loved. This is a different analogy than that which he used when, early in this Gospel, he had that fateful conversation at the Samaritan well – with the woman who would become essentially his first missionary as she rushed back to her village to tell everyone about Jesus. You may recall that he told *her* that, unlike the water in that well, he was the source of living water that would gush up to eternal life. Whether the image, though, is of water or bread or wine, Jesus is the source of love and life, the one who will satisfy all our hunger and thirst.

Let us not, however, walk away from this reading basking in that reassurance. For Jesus came not only to give us life, but also to ask that we use it in his service. Jesus is, you will recall, the one who reversed roles by tying the towel around himself so that he could wash the feet of his disciples. Jesus is the one who told Peter three times to “feed my sheep.” Just as Jesus made it clear that he was here to show that even *he* was to be a servant to others, he also is here to show *us* that we too must serve others.

One of the ugly facts of Christianity is that far too often through the centuries Christians have done precisely what the story of the manna that came from heaven was trying to discourage. They have hoarded their Eucharistic bread. It is not for nothing that it was once said that the most segregated place in America was church on Sunday morning. Indeed, when our own Episcopal church arrived in Central America, it was not to bring our particular take on Christianity to the indigenous people living there, but, essentially, to be chaplains to the rich industrialists who spoke English there – like, for example, the United Fruit people, whose company was called by natives “the Octopus” because its

tentacles were everywhere. Can it be surprising then that there are so few Episcopalians in that part of the world?

When Jesus invites us to think of the bread we eat as partaking of his very flesh, he is bringing us into the deepest mystery of Christianity. We eat his flesh and thereby we participate in his very nature. No longer can we simply luxuriate in the assurance that we are being brought into eternal life. We are also being asked to a discipleship through which, like Jesus himself, we become, not masters, but servants. This doesn't mean that we all have to become medical missionaries like Albert Schweitzer. We can still live our lives using the particular gifts God has granted us. But I am convinced that what Jesus is asking is for us to trade in the standards by which we have been taught to judge our merit – money, position, power, the number and cost of our toys. Instead, we should see every transaction in our daily lives as an opportunity to serve Christ by serving others. Never should we utter, even to ourselves, the expression “Me first.” It is in this way that we become truly Christ-like.

Let us pray:

Help us, Jesus, to heed your call as we satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst through you – and to see you and to serve you always in all we meet. Bring us, we pray, through your mystery into a closer walk with you, and, when our course is run and our time on earth is done, into your heavenly kingdom where, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign eternally. AMEN