

Pentecost10-B

8/1/21

*John 6:24-35; Eph. 4:1-16*

Yummy cherry pies, delicious chocolate cakes and butter tarts - my mom was a pretty good baker. Not a great cook, but a great baker. And every once in a while she would even bake bread. It filled the house with the smell of yeast. The bread came out of the oven dark and heavy. My dad loved it. It was rich and nutritious and it reminded him his childhood, I think, growing up out on the prairies of Saskatchewan, “the breadbasket of the world”.

My brother and I hated that bread. Everything about it. It didn't smell right or look right and it sure didn't taste right. We liked that white bread, that came in plastic bags, with the picture of the little blonde girl in the blue dress eating a slice all slathered with butter. That's what we were used to, that's what the bread man delivered, that's what was sold to us. Nice and spongy, tasteless, so soft you could roll it up into tiny little pellets to chew or throw at your brother. No nutrition whatsoever except maybe some additives. But, that's what we liked.

Well, the bread that we read about today in all our readings, and in fact our readings for the next few Sundays, is more like that good old homemade bread, not that spongy white bread. The hearty kind of bread that Russian peasants used eat that was a whole meal, bread that you could actually live on. The bread of life. That's the kind of bread we are talking about.

Today, Jesus says I AM that bread of life. Wow! This is one of the great I AM statements in John's Gospel: I Am the light of the world, the resurrection and the life. Not meant to be taken literally, obviously, but metaphors, like everything that we say about God is a metaphor, who is beyond our understanding. This one has particular resonance: the bread of life..

Because bread is so primal that it's loaded with all kinds of symbolism – like the daily bread Jesus teaches us to ask for from God. Daily bread, like manna from heaven, stands for just about everything we could need, physically and spiritually. Certainly it means food – just about any kind of food – to say we break bread together just means we eat a meal together. It also means that we gather together, have fellowship, have community: as I said, primal. And when we ask God to give us our daily bread, we mean whatever we need to sustain life. It could mean clean

air to breathe and water to drink, food to eat, a safe place to shelter, and even a community to surround and support us and love us. It's the bread of life.

Jesus said, I AM all that. I bring all that to the world. I am the Bread of Life.

So we have the Eucharist. We eat the Bread of Life. In my former parish we used to have first communion on Maundy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper, the first Eucharist. So, of course leading up to their first communion we would have classes with the kids, some of whom were as young as 3 and 4 years old. We would talk about how the bread and wine means Christ among us, he is in the bread, in the wine, "in, with, and under" as Luther supposedly said. But I think the part that really sank in was when at the final class we baked our own bread. Everybody would get flour and water, probably no yeast if I remember correctly; they would make it into any shape they wanted, a cross or a star, and we would put it in the oven in the church kitchen and bake it. And then at the end of that class we would eat some of it, and save some of it for their first communion. And that would be the bread we used for the service. And that meant something to them, more than all the words. It was tactile – you could feel it and see it, and taste it. It was made with love, and it was communal. And it was real bread that Jesus said, was his body.

So, when Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life today, part of what he is saying of course is that he feeds people. And this is very important, we can't skip over this. In a very real way, he came to feed people real food. In the the reign of God, which he brings into the world, all people have enough to eat. This is a very radical view because we think it as natural that some of us should have as much to eat as we want, and some of us should starve. We think that's just the way it is in the real world. I just read a statistic that said that 10% of all the people in our country don't have enough to eat. In a nation that throws away tons of food every day, into dumpsters and landfills, where it rots and pollutes the atmosphere. And we're about average. In poor and war torn countries like Yemen, the percentage of hungry people gets up closer to 50%.

Jesus doesn't accept that. He came to give himself as the Bread of Life. He came so that we can all have life and have it abundantly. So part of what it means to follow Jesus is to make sure everyone has enough to eat. And enough clean air to breath an enough clean water to drink. Which, would take a miracle, and that's what the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, which happened just before today's reading, is all about. Then Jesus says to the people "OK, I've filled your stomachs and there's more where that came from, but not just literally. All you need, even food for the Spirit."

As we progress through these readings in the weeks to come, we will hear Jesus talk about that spiritual food. He tells them they have to eat his flesh and drink his blood, language he uses to shock people I think to help them understand with this bread of life and this wine of the covenant we take Jesus into ourselves and he becomes part of us. Or, put another way, we become part of him.

Becoming part of Jesus is the only way we are going to be able to follow him where he goes. To take up our crosses. To love our enemies, to pray for those who hate us, to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. That's the strong, nutritious bread of life that he brings. We need that bread, we can't do that ourselves. We need the manna from heaven we hear about today that is such a big part of the story of God's people. Nourishment for the journey that comes from Jesus in our lives.

Because everything we need to sustain us comes from God. And it has to be the real thing; it can't be the white bread version the world wants to sell us.