

Pentecost 10-B

8/11/2021

*John 6:35,41-51; 1 Kings 19:4-8*

Ruth had just moved into an assisted living home and this was going to be my first visit with her there. For some reason I had forgotten my communion kit, though, until I was halfway there and it was too late to turn around. So, reluctantly, I decided we would have to wait until next time to have communion.

Ruth was happy to see me, as always, but she did seem a little disappointed when I told her we'd have to wait until next month for communion. She was usually a pretty upbeat person, but as the visit went on, I began to see that she really was not a happy camper that day. She complained about her new home, about the food, and about how she was losing touch with the people at the church. This was not like her. Finally almost out of desperation I asked if maybe it would be okay, if I could get some bread and grape juice from the kitchen, that we would share an improvised Eucharist. She thought that would be great. I went out to the kitchen, bummed a piece of Wonder Bread from one of the workers, found some orange juice in the fridge and Ruth and I had a service of communion. And suddenly she was back to her old cheerful self. A miraculous change seemed to come over her. She had gotten what she had needed – the bread from heaven, the Bread of Life.

Some of the earliest visual images we have of the church from antiquity are in the catacombs of Rome - drawings on the walls of what essentially were tombs under the city - drawings of a church service that was being held in that place. Crude kind of paintings of people standing around an altar with a presider praying over the bread and wine. Images of worshipers together in community in the only the only safe place they could find during their persecution by the empire: hiding in these tombs. This was what they risked their lives to do – share the body and blood of Christ. It was that important to them.

There is something very meaningful for us about this bread and this wine.

The book of Acts tells us that what the church was in the first century was in fact simply people gathered by the Holy Spirit around word and sacrament. And that is what the Augsburg Confession, our Lutheran book of doctrine, says we are. For Ruth, sure it was important that the pastor came to visit her, but she really needed the body and blood of Christ, she needed that sacrament to connect and bind her to the rest of the church.

You how remember in the days before COVID we used to pray over home communion at the end of the service and ask God's blessing on those who would receive it? Then we would actually take the bread from this meal that we shared together here in this place out to those who couldn't be here with us, so that they, and we, could remember that even if we are not physically together, we are still part of the same church. And we will get back to that practice once we really get on top of this virus, because it is a powerful reminder that we are bound together by the sacrament.

And that together we are nourished by it.

In our first reading today the prophet Elijah was ready to give up on his life. He had had an epic battle with the prophets of the false god, Baal, and defeated them, but at a great price. The queen, the notorious Jezebel, wanted him dead and so now he was on the run. There was a bounty on his head. He had escaped out into the desert but, now finally he had had enough of running away. He was tired. "...O Lord take away my life," he said.

He lay down to die in the wilderness. But then the angel of the Lord came to him, and brought him food and drink for the journey: cakes and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and then the angel brought more. And this meal gave him the strength he needed to go on – to go to the mountaintop, where he would hear the voice of the Lord and received his mission, that of a great prophet.

Christ, the Bread of Heaven, comes to us in word and sacrament and feeds us with forgiveness for our sins. And then, just as Elijah was sent, we are sent forth by Jesus with our mission. Fed, we never need to succumb to despair; fed by God's own self we know we will have the strength we need; fed, we can go on.

And yes, it's a bit of a setback to have to go back to these little prepackaged elements. Didn't it feel great to think we were getting past this virus and were actually able to come to the altar and share the host and drink real wine? And just to think, soon we'd be able to use actual bread, again, broken and shared. More tactile, more literal, the better to help us remember that this is a real meal we share. Now, alas, we are having to regroup and it may be a while yet until we can get back to the comfort and familiarity of that meal. But, as with those Christians in the catacombs, as with Elijah, or as with Ruth and me that day, we can be grateful for what we have. It's the Spirit of Christ in, with, and under these elements that makes this not just any meal but the banquet table of salvation. And as we know, this meal, in whatever form it takes, is always only a foretaste of the feast to come.

Because Jesus does not say "I am the chocolate torte of life" or "I am the yummy homemade croissant of life." No, he says, simply "I am the bread of life." In Jesus' day, as it is now, bread and wine were so common that even the poorest community could lay hands on it in some form, so there could never be a question as to how accessible he is to us. Anybody can join in the meal. You don't have to be special. Even if you have to go into the kitchen and bum a piece of bread and some orange juice, or use prepackaged wafers and grape juice, he will be there. Jesus is for everyone, anytime.

So as we share this meal today, we can take courage and rejoice in the knowledge that we join a great cloud of witnesses from all ages and all places. As humbled as we may be, as besieged as we are by this pesky and deadly virus, we are gathered, fed, and sent forth, nourished in our faith and strengthened by Jesus himself for the road ahead. Thanks be to God.

Amen.