

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Church of the Advent
August 5, 2018

Bread of Heaven

The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven. These are the words of the Eucharist, words that draw us into a familiar space of welcome and comfort, words that set a rhythm to our faith and of our hope as Christians. Though we say and hear them at every celebration of the Eucharist, today we are challenged to stop and listen to the words, to hold them close, and to think about what they mean to us. What does it mean that our God incarnate, Jesus Christ likened himself, his own body, to bread?



Historians tell us that humans have been baking bread for at least 30,000 years, with yeast introduced as late as 300 years before the time of Jesus. Bread is the most widely consumed food in the world, evolved from grains first ground between stones by hand, then in mills powered by animals and moving water, and eventually to the relatively recent highly mechanized process of mass production enhanced by the invention of the bread slicer—first installed in a factory in 1928, making Wonder Bread a reality of questionable significance. Just in my lifetime, bread has evolved to the pure light and bleached white stuff of my childhood—known as *Colonial* Bread in Atlanta, Georgia—that could be rolled into a tight ball for a more interesting and treasured snack, and then thankfully to an infinite variety of whole grained offerings found at specialty bakeries like Rachel K's in Washington, Panera Bread, or even on the chain grocery store shelves, marketed to generate a reverence for something more ancestral, and good for us—that is unless you need to live in the gluten-free camp.

Yet the importance of bread to all humans goes deeper than its portability and its wide accessibility. We are programmed in our very DNA to crave its carbohydrate-laden goodness, though perhaps that evolutionary trait was initially matched to a population who did physical work all day and worked harder for their food than is required by a drive-in window or microwave. And in spite of its occasional elevation to the artisan loaves laid on tables covered in crisp white restaurant linen accompanied by a slab of soft Irish butter, bread in many simpler and more basic forms is foundational in the diets of all kinds of people all over the world. Flat breads, tortillas, pita breads, sourdough, cornbread *and* biscuits. Bread is life.

Our gospel story today has Jesus speaking all about bread. He has just come from the miracle of feeding thousands from a few loaves and a couple of fish. Perhaps the crowd had not understood the meager beginnings of the meal that was handed to them so far away from the center of the action—especially if all they saw were their own portions distributed from an ever-filled basket. Still, an awareness that something extraordinary had happened had sent many of them to chase Jesus down, even as he had deliberately tried to get away from the crowd. They followed him in a flotilla of boats across the Sea of Galilee to find him in Capernaum. They wanted more—more signs of his claim to divinity, more instructions on how to live into God’s favor, more *bread*. They had somehow connected the bread-duplicating work of Jesus to an ancestral memory of the manna in the desert, but they couldn’t quite make sense of it all.

The story of the manna in the desert had begun with some grumpy Israelites who had quickly forgotten about their escape through the parted Red Sea when they started to get hungry. They were so testy that they grumbled to Moses and Aaron that they would have been better off dying in Egypt with their bellies full. They missed their ovens and the smell of fresh bread baking, no doubt; probably dreamed about harvesting the grain, grinding it into flour and

kneading it into the dough. Even *slaves* in Egypt had bread. Well, God heard their whining and sent them bread—or at least what God called bread—that flaky white *something* that was as fine as frost, called manna. In Hebrew the word *manna* is translated as “*what is it?*” The stuff was so weird that they did not even recognize it, and Moses had to tell them that this was the bread that God gave them to eat. Manna was a gift of sustenance that showed up on the ground and on the desert shrubs every morning for 40 years. They were encouraged to gather what they needed for that day and found that when they tried to hoard it that it spoiled. It was truly their “daily bread.” Who knows how they ate it: did it dry into flour to be made into cakes? Did they put it in a bowl and add goat’s milk? Did they lick it off their fingers? In whatever way it was ingested, it fed them. That stuff called “*what is it?*” brought the Israelites back to themselves, and they did *not* starve, and they did *not* go back to Egypt. Manna secured their journey to the Promised Land and then disappeared when they reached their home and were able to grow their own grain and make their own bread.

When the crowds chasing Jesus arrived in Capernaum they were *not quite themselves* either, and they were hungry. Even though they had been so recently fed from the loaves and fishes, it was as if it they had only eaten enough to sustain them for that one day. And isn’t that what our bellies tell us: that despite the experience of being sated by a wonderful meal, despite the feeling of happy fullness lulling us into the brief illusion that we will be pleasantly full forever, we are always hungry the next day?

Jesus understood their hunger even before they showed up. He told them not to seek the food that perishes, but the food that endures for eternal life, offered to them by the Son of Man. The only work they were required to do to get this food was to believe in him whom God had sent. I can almost see the Scooby Doo confusion on their faces, blunting their sincerity and their search

for the assurance of God in their lives. They seemed to understand that the daily gift of manna in the desert was a comforting outward sign of God's presence and protection, and they wanted manna for their own time. They knew a hunger that went deeper than their bellies, and sensed that Jesus was the one to satisfy it. "Sir, give us this bread always," they said. Like the Israelites who had escaped Egypt, these witnesses to the feeding of the five thousand were hungry, and *they were not themselves*. They did not quite understand Jesus, no more than their ancestors understood "what is it" manna, yet they were willing to take a chance on believing what he said.

There is a deep hunger inside of each of us for a life in God that cannot be satisfied by Wonder Bread or artisan bread or even whole grain bread with sunflower seeds slathered with Irish butter. We might try calming this hunger by work or travel or entertainment or becoming a great cook, or so many other human enterprises which are good and right, and work for a while, and yet cannot keep us filled. Our hunger for the Bread of Heaven which gives life to the world is real, and the food we need is at our fingertips every day. God continues to give mortals the bread of angels, manna providing for us food enough. We don't always recognize it and we don't always know what to do with it, but it is there as promised each and every day, known in the signs and wonders found in every life—every day—small miracles of kindness or beauty or laughter or healing, or gifts of exquisite tenderness or sadness that touch our capacity to respond with compassion. Sometimes manna is food, sometimes insight, sometimes opportunity. Sometimes it is salvation.

Today God simply calls us to the altar to eat at the Eucharistic feast. The bread that has been taken, broken and given by Jesus Christ is the outward sign of invisible grace that falls like manna from the sky to satisfy our deepest hunger. It takes only an open hand and an open heart to eat and be well filled, for he gives us what we crave, and what we need to be our true selves again. Take. Eat. The Body of Christ. The Bread of Heaven. AMEN

