

*O God, who hast made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and didst send thy blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after thee and find thee; bring the nations into thy fold; pour out thy Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of thy kingdom; in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good Morning!

I don't know about you, but I think it's fun to talk about food. Over the past week, when not preaching, teaching, praying, or leading a meeting, I think most of what I talked about with folks had to do with comparative analysis of food and drink. And really, over the past few years, most of my closest friends were people who work and own businesses in service and hospitality, and part of what drove those friendships was a deep and abiding respect for the life-giving power of food, not just in its ability to fill our bellies and help us produce important chemicals for our nutrition, but for its power to help humans to better enjoy the life that food can afford us.

Food then, like so much of the human experience, can be enjoyed, examined, and thought about on so many levels. A piece of bread is a pretty simple thing; flour, water, maybe some salt, maybe some yeast, and heat is all you really need. But again, think about how much one can think and say about something as simple as a piece of bread. There are few things that stir our emotions, perk up our intellect, and bring us together as food.

It's not surprising that somebody as wise as Jesus was all over this. He was often seen eating and drinking with people, sometimes in ways that caused controversy. Even in St. John's account Gospel, whence our reading came today, Jesus' first miracle was to make water into wine such that a wedding party could keep going in Cana of Galilee. Last week, we read again about one of his most famous works of power in feeding a few thousand people with a truly impressive amount of fish and loaves, a monumental catering task completed with only a scant amount of *mise en place*. But crucially, as amazing as his multiplication of fishes and loaves was, there was much, much more to his work than just the calories, way more going on with Jesus' work than being just the world's best and most efficient fish and bread dispenser. And that part of the story is very much where we find ourselves today in this portion of John's sixth chapter.

Just look at how today's portion of John 6 begins: the people who were there for the bread and fish started to look for him around the city of Capernaum. By the time they figured out that he was across the water from where he started, you get the feeling that Jesus was kind of in roast mode, ready to be slightly incisive as he spoke with the people. In so doing, he was certainly grabbing their attention and drawing their attention to human need beyond the acquisition of calories, all while carefully layering his teaching about himself and the meaning of his ministry. He chided those looking for him, as if they were looking for some more of that free bread and fish. There he taught them to consider a source of life that does not rot away, a source of strength that would last forever, even into eternity; a meal which the Son of Man would himself offer to them, and indeed offer for the life of the world.

Doesn't that sound great, though? Most food spoils on us. Even shelf stable, well-preserved food does have a limited time for healthy use. Except Spam. Spam might actually last forever. I'm kidding of course but think about how much time and technology goes into keeping food fresh or free from spoil. There were some pretty ingenious methods for ancient people to store and preserve food, but what Jesus was promising must have been pretty compelling to ancient Judean: a food with no expiration date; a way to stay strong and healthy forever. That kind of food would certainly be worth putting in some work over, and that's most certainly why they ask what it would take to get some of that in the pantry. But the work that Jesus offers is belief that he is indeed the one sent from God, believe that his word is true, and therefore to live as if the life of Heaven, present in Jesus, is the true life of all that dwell on earth.

Interestingly, John records a challenge from those speaking to Jesus. Now, recall that they were the ones who had just enjoyed the meal of fish and bread given to five thousand despite starting with enough for a small family. They ask for yet another sign to prove that Jesus was the Son of Man, the true Messiah of God. You'd think one was enough but maybe they thought they'd get a free breakfast out of it. But they know their Bible and they deploy the story of the manna in the wilderness to make their point. Of course, their asking for further signs underscored the faithless of Israel in the face of such a generous gift as free bread every morning from Heaven. Although we don't read it in today's lesson from Exodus, the Israelites did not follow God's instructions and try to hoard some of the manna despite His promise that He'd take care of them completely. He'd already shown Himself mighty enough to take them out of Egypt in pretty spectacular fashion. Yet, the Israelites back then, just as the ones right on front of Jesus, showed a profound lack of trust even in the face of pretty major divine power moves.

Jesus simply reminded them that the manna was a gift of life from God who desired the strength of the People of Israel so that they could survive in the wilderness, receive their inheritance promised to them, and fulfill the vocation to bless the nations by magnifying their Heavenly Liberator, that same God had sent a new source of life in Jesus. And should people partake in that new heavenly food, they would enjoy a food, a bread meant for the life of the world, such that all may have a chance to enjoy the vocation of magnifying God, loving Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and therefore increasing the bonds of love among human beings.

Today's passage contains one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture. I quote a part of it almost every day: "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Jesus promised his neighbors, promises us, access to something that transcends the needs of the belly and rather gives life to the innermost parts of our being; even the human heart. I always imagine a stunned pause after Jesus finished his brief word. A plaintive, simple response was apparently offered: "Sir give us this bread always."

Jesus in reply simply doubles down. "I am the Bread of Life," he said. And with him as the source of our life no need of ours will ever eclipse his provision and care for us.

If your mind wanders immediately to the Eucharist rather than brunch with all this talk of heavenly food, you're headed in the direction that St. John wanted you to go. This chapter is unreservedly Eucharistic even if John never used the word or left some clunky explanation notes. But make no mistake, the bread of heaven, the source of light and life for the world was here when the Word Became Flesh. He died, rose to new life, and ascended into Heaven for us and comes among us in his mysterious presence in his Body and Blood, the gift we are about to partake in the Blessed Sacrament.

Dear ones, even for a moment today, consider the gift we are able to enjoy in the regular food that God gives us. Then of course, consider the heavenly food of the sacrament, the Bread of Heaven, Jesus. He is among us today and seeks to strengthen us for the days ahead, for the work he has given us to do, such that all of our activities would magnify his Holy Name. On Friday this week, the Church will observe the feast of the Transfiguration, when Jesus' countenance was changed to stunning bright pure light. May we eat of the Bread of Life and be continually transformed by it so that we ourselves would radiate the light of Christ for the life of the world.

To Him be all glory; from age to age. Amen.