

Lectionary 18B 2018, John 6:24-25, August 5, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

As I mentioned last Sunday we are now embarking on a grand listening tour of the sixth chapter of John's gospel. Here we will hear Jesus expand upon another great image he uses for himself, "I am the bread of life." He uses others, "I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Vine, I am Living Water, I am the Way." Last week's story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish serve as the immediate context of this powerful image.

Jesus was a master at taking simple, strong images, connected to daily life and applying them to God. What could be a simpler, yet more powerful and central image than bread? Throughout human history bread is at the center of most cultures. When human beings discovered how to make bread nomadic hunters and gatherers began to settle more permanently in small villages. Stability produces a different kind of culture. Eventually writing develops and ideas are recorded for future generations. At the center of this growth in culture rests food production with bread as the main ingredient.

Bread of a different sort forms the centerpiece of the first reading we heard this morning. The Book of Exodus gives us the account of how the Israelites came to be sustained by a unique bread while they wandered forty years in the desert. Each day this bread, which they called manna, appeared on the ground. And each morning they would go out and gather enough for just one day. If they tried to save it, or hoard it beyond one day, the manna grew foul and maggot infested. The only exception was the day before the Sabbath. On that day the Israelites could gather enough for two days, so as not to have to work on the Sabbath, the day of rest. Manna, literally, was a gift of God. When the Israelites settled into the land and built the temple they kept a loaf of bread in the Holy of Holies, by the ark of the covenant, as a symbol for the living presence of God. Bread and God are intimately entwined in the Jewish faith.

Bread is both a literal and important food, and it's a symbol and sign for all that is good and necessary and God-given in the world. "Give us this day our daily bread," we pray in the prayer taught to us by Jesus. "What is meant by 'daily bread'?", Martin Luther asks in his catechism. "Daily bread includes everything needed for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property, work and income, a devoted family, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health, a good name, and true friends and neighbors." So we can see the term "bread" is also a symbol, a metaphor. It is a deeply rich word symbolizing all we hold precious.

Last week I noted how the crowds, after having eaten their fill of bread, tried to make Jesus into a king. Jesus resists their attempts. In today's reading he explains why. "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." Their physical hungers were satisfied by the feast Jesus provided. They believed Jesus was the answer to all their problems. They ate the bread. Their hunger is quenched. Let's make this man king, so we never go hungry again.

But I want you to notice how Jesus reinterprets eating bread. "Do not work for the food that perishes," he says, "but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Do not work for the food that perishes. Here food and bread mean the same thing. Most every food today has an expiration date stamped onto it. No food will last forever. Here Jesus is referring to the perishable wilderness manna that appeared

in the morning all fresh and tasty, but by evening had turned rotten and foul. His words are similar to what he said elsewhere in the Bible: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal." Perishing bread can mean all those things in life that are illusory or temporary. Perishing bread can mean an ever increasing desire for material goods. Each one purchased satisfying a desire, but then the desire once satisfied it returns again. And like a drug habit, the purchase, like the next fix, must be more and more, to satisfy the craving.

Jesus tells those who are fixated on perishable bread to turn their attention to that bread which never gives out and always satisfies. "It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Just as bread sustains physical life here on earth, this bread from God sustains one's true and heavenly existence. In John's gospel that which comes from heaven is a shorthand way of saying everything that comes from God. Eternal life, forgiveness, unity with the Father, that whole born-from-above life which is entirely and totally a gift and which is summarized by John as saying "God is love." Love is the very heart of God which is seen as the Son of Man is lifted up in order to draw all people to himself.

We live in a hungry world. It's hard to talk about spiritual hunger when millions, maybe even a billion persons go to bed hungry at night. But the same was true in Jesus' day. Poverty was then, and is now, a way of life. Yet believing we aren't permitted to think about our own spiritual hunger until all the world's physical hunger is alleviated is itself a symptom of our own deep craving. We can seek both; physical sustenance for the poor and spiritual food for all, hungry and satisfied alike. For in reality we are all hungry for that food which satisfies eternally. We all have gnawing deep in our inmost being a desire for God. That restlessness, deep in our souls, is itself the Spirit of God, stirring us to wake from our slumber and seek the food which truly satisfies.

The food which satisfies our hunger comes from the one who is the very bread of life itself. Jesus comes into the world to show us the true and more satisfying desire of love and compassion. He comes to be that very love and compassion embodied in human life. He is the bread of life that can satisfy all our longings, all our hunger. And when we eat of this bread, the hunger goes away, the craving is finally filled. Jesus is bread in that fullest, most expansive sense of that word, because he shows us by his own life a new and better way to live. He is one who lives outside the persistent desire to satisfy our cravings through more and more consumption. The bread which satisfies hungry hearts and leads us to live and love one another. Amen.