

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

I don't think many of us were particularly focused on the Gospel last week – or on much of anything other than that it was Fr. Wayne's last Sunday with us, and we were making a heartfelt "Goodbye, and God be with you." And today, we take our first hesitant steps into exploring who we, as a community of faith, are now, who we have become, 12 years later, without Fr. Wayne and Harry in our midst. I smiled as I prayed with today's Scriptures this week – thinking that God has incredible timing and a great sense of humor – because the reading from Exodus, with the Israelites in transition from their previous life in Egypt to a new life in the yet-to-be-found Promised Land, seems like a gentle, all too timely, and deeply personal "Let me tell you a story" from God – a story that says, "I know that transition is hard. But remember that I have been, and am, and will always be with you. I will feed you in the wilderness of this new journey, this new adventure of faith." It is a message of comfort, and one of direction that also stems from today's Gospel.

Today's passage from John's gospel depends on last week's for context. Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus feeding the multitude with only a couple of fish and five loaves of bread. We were told that, after *giving thanks* for the fish and loaves – not after grumbling about how little it was to be shared among so many, but after *giving thanks* for what **was** there, Jesus "distributed them – as much as they wanted." And there were twelve baskets of leftovers. – And then Jesus went off by himself on the mountain, and the disciples took off in the boat without him. John says, "It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them." - Remember this is *John's* gospel – the mystical one. And so, when John says, "It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them," part of what he is saying is that they didn't understand what had happened. They were "in the dark."

You know my take on the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Jesus called each person there out of his or her sense of self-preservation, and greed, and fear of not having enough, into sharing what little each one had – so that *each one* shared their resources, and there was enough – more than enough – for everyone. Jesus was showing them a new way of living in community with one another.

Either the disciples didn't understand – they were “in the dark” – or they didn't really want to understand. They took off in the boat – and Jesus came to them, in that darkness, walking on the water. And when they were frightened, he said, “Do not be afraid – it is I.” What is translated as “it is I” here, though, is – in the Greek from the original text – really “I AM,” the Name that God revealed to *Moses*. And that “I am” statement is John telling us that God – the great “I AM” - is present, in Jesus.

That brings us to today's Gospel – where the folks track down Jesus and the disciples yet again. They come looking, Jesus says, not because they got the message about a new way of living, but because they had their fill of bread. They ask for some *sign* from him, so they might believe. “Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness...” And Jesus explains that it is God who gave the manna, and God who now gives *him*, Jesus, as bread for the world. In both the manna and in Jesus, God is revealing Godself to us.

Our take-away from the Gospel today is that *what will sustain us* – the bread that will endure – is the God-life we see revealed in Jesus. God will sustain us for our journey, wherever it takes us, with “bread from Heaven” – that is, with God's own life and presence revealed to us most clearly in Jesus, the Christ, the Word made Flesh.

John is deliberately pointing us back to the story of the Israelites eating manna in the desert. God had delivered them from all that was not life-giving, and had called them to a new life. God led them by fire and by cloud into this ‘wilderness’ – this ‘in-between’ place – where they remembered the life they *had* led, and thought maybe it wasn't so bad. What's wrong with how we've always lived? At least we had food... But God calls us, always, beyond where we are, into a deeper relationship with God, into greater understanding, into deeper trust for all that we cannot understand.

God provided the quail by night – which was a delicacy – and manna – which some scholars say translates literally as “what is it?” – each morning. The Israelites were called to leave behind all that they had known, and to trust in God leading them into something new. God fed them with quail they could delight in, but God also fed them with food they could not recognize – that is, with *a NEW* bread... God sustained them in their wilderness experience, but only when they gathered that food each night and each morning. No hoarding it up, no stockpiling. Gather it every day, and trust that it will be there.

John does not want us to lose the lesson: God will sustain us, yet God is continually calling us to leave behind what we have known, the comfort of the familiar – and to trust in God’s presence with us on our journey. That trust involves a journey whose end we do not see, and daily reliance – *daily gathering* of the food that God provides to sustain us. And as John tells us – that sustenance for us now is the Bread of Life – the life of Jesus, that we are asked, not just to observe or run after or read about, but to take into our being. John, in these Sundays selections all about Jesus as the bread of life, is inviting us to *feed* on the life of Jesus – to *ingest* it, to allow it to become part of who we are. John, who names Jesus as the Word made Flesh, invites us to feed on Word and Eucharist as the Bread of Life.

You are what you eat. Eat McDonald’s every day for a month, as one man did, and you’ll pick up 30 pounds and move your cholesterol off the chart. When Jesus claims that *his body* should be real food, that *he* was the bread of life – that was bold. But it was a claim grounded in the same reality that Jesus speaks repeatedly in John’s gospel: “I AM”. God is present, is revealed, is enfleshed, is incarnate in Jesus, the Word made Flesh. And that is the relationship into which we, too, are called.

In the third century, Augustine wrote, “If you receive the Eucharist well, you are what you eat. Since you are the Body of Christ and his members, it is your mystery which you receive. As you come to communion, you hear the words ‘The Body of Christ’ and you answer ‘Amen’. Be, therefore, members of Christ that your ‘Amen’ may be true. Be what you see. Receive what you already are.”

We are the Body of Christ, and that Body is always on pilgrimage. As it says in the “Servant Song,” “We are pilgrims on a journey; we are travelers on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.” May we, every day, see and recognize and gather the sustenance God provides on our journey. And may we live out these days as the writer to the Ephesians exhorted: “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Amen.

[Exodus 16:2-4,9-15](#) [Psalm 78:23-29](#) [Ephesians 4:1-16](#) [John 6:24-35](#)