

## 12 Pentecost, Proper 14.

One of my favorite old jokes goes that a lifelong Episcopalian in her seventies finally cracks open the bible itself for the first time. And after reading for a few minutes she turns to her friend and says, “Well I declare, I never realized that the Bible quotes so much from the Book of Common Prayer.” I thought of this not quite hilarious joke this week because I think it’s impossible for faithful Episcopalians to hear this passage from the Gospel of John and not be transported to the communion rail where we most often hear these words: the bread of life, the bread of heaven. If you’re visiting with us, these are the words we say as we share the blessed bread at communion, which is both bread and somehow the body of Christ, just as we are both our normal stressed out bungling selves and somehow together the body of Christ.

These words recur over and over again this month because much to every preacher’s chagrin, we are in week three of five weeks that we spend on what is called the bread of life discourse. There’s a pattern to the readings in this cycle. To highlight the continuity of the readings, each week begins with the last line of the story from the week before. The cycle began when Jesus fed five thousand people on just a little bread and fish, and then each week has bystanders murmuring about “who does this guy think he is?” and Jesus trying to tell them by beating the bread metaphor to death.

It’s no wonder that the folks keep asking questions, because there’s clearly some miscommunication going on. I’m sure that what Jesus is saying is correct, but that isn’t to say that I at all understand it. Overall, Jesus is trying to get across that in him God is doing something new—that in him God has come to the people in a palpable, tangible way. In him, we have direct access to the very truth of the divine life and are invited into that life. It’s the kind of point that is a little hard to explain, and perhaps even harder to convince someone of, so he tries referencing prophets and other times that God has cared for the people and he turns around this bread metaphor until we’re all a bit dizzy.

Of course when we hear it we think of communion. Our weekly use of some of these same words—the bread of life, the bread of heaven—reminds us weekly that God in Jesus is still coming to us in tangible, palpable, life-changing ways. Our belonging in Christ is still inviting us into the divine life that is eternal. Whatever it is that is happening in the Eucharist, we trust that in it God in Jesus comes to us, we eat, and then we carry God out to the world. The bread becomes the body of Christ for us, but only so that we might become the body of Christ for the world.

I wouldn’t mind waxing lyrical for a while here about the Eucharist, about what it means that our central act of worship is a shared meal, about the complicated and beautiful ways that we give and receive in communion, about the way that when we come

to the table we receive grace whether we're feeling very holy or really quite distracted and tired and even a little irritated.

But I think the key this week might be the fact that this five week long discourse on Jesus as the bread of heaven and how his presence somehow enfolds us into the divine life, actually started with Jesus literally feeding five thousand people. All this talk that reminds us so much of our central act of worship begins with the miraculous but profoundly incarnational insistence that everybody should get dinner. In other words, this very long spiritual-y discourse demonstrates for us a balance between work and worship and how the two flow constantly into each other.

Jesus feeds people; they ask "hey how'd you do that?" or "what did that mean?" And Jesus talks at great length, providing the material that forms our worship. It is what makes us a church, instead of a society of Oak Park do-gooders or a loose collection of spiritual enthusiasts. Work for the world and worship of God are not two separated things for us to choose between. In the church, they are two movements in the same song that flow into each other smoothly and without interruption. The work leads to worship which leads back out into work. We are not at liberty to take the holy meal of the Eucharist without feeling a call to feed the hungry. And when we feed the hungry we are making little eucharists in the soup kitchen, the food pantry, the McDonald's parking lot, our dining rooms, because we are reenacting holy meals provided by Jesus.

This is good news. God is still coming to us and so we worship. And God comes to us to send us out, and so we work. Amen.