

Pentecost 12B, Proper 15.
Still More Bread of Life Discourse. August 15, 2021.

If you've been coming to church with some regularity this summer, then you've heard quite a bit about bread over the last month. This is our fourth week in what is called the "Bread of Life discourse," when Jesus spends a whole chapter of John's gospel trying to get across to followers and opponents what it means that *he* is the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven to give life to the world, the bread and drink that leave us never hungry or thirsty again. It has in some ways felt like a long meditation on the Eucharist, and I think that reading is entirely appropriate. Perhaps Jesus hasn't been only talking about the Eucharist, but this long argument certainly does include him talking about the meal of grace he continues to give us, and by which our faith continues to be sustained.

But when we remember that this whole chapter began with the feeding of the five thousand, with the miraculous mundane act of giving hungry people literal food to sate literal hunger, we get a kind of microcosm of much of our faith life together. Worship and work, adoring God and serving God's people, being spiritually fed and giving food to the hungry. The soul and the belly may be the two most important concerns of the church.

The most obvious order for this connection is pretty clear. We who are fed at God's table each week go into the world to feed God's people—and that's everyone. Our worship is centered on this holy meal, and that in turn shapes our work in the world. So we can say that every Eucharistic church is obligated to hold feeding ministries close to its heart. If we are fed, we must feed others. But I think that we can go a little further than this. If the Eucharist norms our behavior in the world, then we can say more. First, despite some of our common language, we do not *take* communion, we receive it. The Lord's body cannot be taken—it can only be received as a free gift. This is why we generally lay our hands out flat to receive the bread, instead of reaching out to pinch it from my fingers.

The holy meal is given to us. And so when we go into the world to serve God's people, we do not go as proprietors who are giving away something that we own. Christian social work is not charity raining down from on high. Instead, it is sharing what we have been given, often whether we deserve it or not. It's subtle, but vitally important. Because the goods that we share are ours only as gifts we have received. And in sharing, we come alongside rather than standing above.

But also, in receiving a gift we relinquish some control. And this, too, teaches us something about Christian work in the world. When we craft or manufacture something, we want desperately to control every facet of the process and to guarantee an outcome. But when we receive a gift, we don't have those options. What comes, comes. And when it comes, it brings us joys and obligations that we cannot control or predict. If we take this principle into our service to God's people, then we have to hold our urge for control loosely. It's a different way of engaging with the world, of working with what is before us and being less obsessed than usual with

success. Strangely, it lets us take on projects that we wouldn't otherwise risk, because we're playing with house money.

The Eucharist then teaches us something about how to receive and how to share. But our worship norms our social work in other ways, as well. The Eucharist is communal. I cannot say Mass by myself—we must do it together. And yet even if we all do our parts perfectly and in community, God is the actor who finally matters most. Without grace, it is a dumbshow with a snack. We do it together, and God makes it matter. So too, then, with our work in the world. The way we share together with our neighbors should draw others into the work. True community is hard, but magnetic. It has a kind of gravitational pull that makes for an ever-expanding community of love and service.

And, our work serving our neighbors finally depends on God. If you have volunteered at, say, the food pantry, then you know that we are able to feed a family, but the day's work doesn't end food insecurity. It holds, I'm afraid, across whatever kind of service or advocacy we may do. We can help, we can accomplish important things; but there is always more to do. We work and we work and we work, and that's very good. And the kingdom of God is something we might join, but cannot ourselves create. The world we are working for will be beyond our capabilities. We cannot save the world, but the world will be saved. And in these last days, this in between era, our job is to keep acting like this is the world that God is saving, because it is.

Our work together flows from and is normed by our worship together. And a worship that does not in some way lead to this work has veered away from Jesus, who fed the hungry before calling himself the bread of life. Among much, much else, the Eucharist teaches us how to receive and calls us to share. It is something we can only do together, and is ultimately dependent entirely on God's grace. So is Christian work in the world. Worship and work, receiving and sharing, being fed and feeding, trusting in each other and in God: this is the Christian life. And by God's grace, it is always more than the sum of its parts. Amen.