

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."



Today is the third Sunday in a row that we have read from John, chapter 6. There is a reason those who put our lectionary together have us read this chapter, essentially from beginning to end- a few verses not included but essentially the entire chapter. What is special about chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John?

In this portion of John's Gospel, we learn more about

who Jesus is- the one who gives us life, the one who shows the way, the one who models the type of relationship we seek to have with God, and that believing Jesus is essential to eternal life. Note: not believing "in" or "on" but believing – that is, what Jesus says to us about himself and about God is the important information.

In this Gospel, Jesus performs "signs" rather than miracles. Most of the time the two words can be treated as synonyms but not always. Miracles imply something supernatural – that is, something occurs which is beyond the ordinary rules of nature. Signs may but do not have to include something beyond our normal comprehension of how our world works. Signs can be something that helps us "see" or understand a part of our life in a new, deeper, more meaningful way.

In John, the first two signs, or miracles, of Jesus are the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana and the feeding of the 5,000. The first two miracles involve wine and bread- the forerunners of our Eucharistic meal.¹ In Chapter 6 Jesus reveals himself first to the crowd (outsiders), then in more depth to his disciples (insiders) and then to those in the synagogue (the ultimate insiders in Jesus' time).

Front and center is Jesus' self-revelation: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). Passive understanding is not enough. One must come- one must move from wherever he or she was when first encountering Jesus to a place of belief. What we need for life is available through Jesus.

One of the first things we do when someone dies or is ill or homebound is to offer food. Food is central to our celebrations as well. Food connects us which is partly what Jesus showed us in the feeding of the 5,000; in the turning of water into wine; when he institutes what we call

¹ Thanks to the Overview to John 6: 1-10:42 in The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. IX by Gail O'Day (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 591 et seq.

communion, the Lord's Supper or the Holy Eucharist. We offer what gives us life to each other. We have references to food and especially to bread throughout our scriptures.

When someone goes on a very low carb diet, bread is often what they miss the most. Bread is the one food whose absence makes it very hard to stay on that diet for an extended period of time. Bread –and its importance in our lives- may be hard-wired into our unconscious.

During the Exodus, the people clamored for bread (Ex. 16). They grumbled against Moses, saying “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex. 16:3).

And God –perhaps exasperated at their grumbling- told Moses that God was “going to rain bread from heaven” (Ex. 16:4). So there! Take that, people of Israel. You want bread, I'll give you bread.

And then there's Elijah the prophet. Elijah goes to visit the widow in Zarephath when the ravens who were bringing him bread at the Wadi Cherith stopped after there was no rain in the land (see 1 Kings 17). Elijah tells the widow to bring him water and to bring him meal- and she replies that she has only a little meal and little oil – and was on her way to make a last meal for herself and her son. Their food had run out and they were sitting down to die once they ate this last meager meal. But because Elijah was known as a prophet of God, she did as he asked. Her grain and oil multiplied and fed them for many days.

In the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-21) five small loaves are multiplied to feed those gathered with fragments left over sufficient to fill 12 baskets. The symbolism of 5 small loaves feeding the multitude with sufficient fragments left over to fill 12 baskets might be that the life given to us by God is beyond anything we can ask or imagine. “I come that you might have life and have it abundantly”, says Jesus (John 10:10).

Today's reading continues the discussion but this time those who knew Jesus as a child are explicitly included. They grumble and complain because their world is being turned upside down. They are being asked to completely discard what they thought they knew about Jesus and to consider him as someone sent from God. Just like us, they couldn't see or understand beyond the literal: “isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” But Jesus responds: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Those who are the ultimate insiders cannot move past what they thought was true: How can this one whose family we know presume to speak for God? The “facts” get in the way of the “truth”. Or, there are none so blind as those who will not see.

Jesus calls our attention to Moses as the one *through whom* God worked the miracle of manna. Moses did not provide the bread that made life possible. God did. Jesus now tells us that he is the one through whom eternal life is possible. Jesus is the one who now gives us bread that is life-giving.

Sister Suzanne Toolan wrote the hymn “I am the bread of life” in 1966.² She “had been asked to write a song for an event in the San Francisco archdiocese. With the deadline looming, she worked on a song in an unoccupied room next to the infirmary in the Catholic girls’ high school where she taught. ‘I worked on it, and I tore it up. I thought, ‘This will not do,’ Toolan said. ‘And this little girl came out of the infirmary and said, ‘What was that? That was beautiful!’ I went right back and Scotch-taped it up. That schoolgirl saved “I Am the Bread of Life.”

A version of it is in our hymnal as number 335.³ The first verse is

I am the bread of life
 they who come to me shall not hunger
 they who believe in me shall not thirst
 No one can come to me
 Unless the father draw them.
 And I will raise them up
 And I will raise them up
 And I will raise them up
 On the last day.

Bread as the symbol of life and of relationship with God.

In the Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:9-11), we say: “Give us this day our daily bread” once again reminding us that bread is integral to life and to our relationship with God. It is God that gives us the bread that leads to eternal life. Just like those in the wilderness, this is bread that is given daily. Not to be hoarded. Bread that needs renewing daily just as our relationship with God needs remembering daily.

The symbolism of bread as life and of our meals together is celebrated in the Eucharist. Jesus tells us that the bread that he gives for the life of the world is his flesh (John 6:51).

In the Eucharist, we say: On the night before he died, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them. ...Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Take.

Bless.

Break.

Give.

The reminder to us that bread is not always just bread. Wine is not always just wine. They are symbols to us – then and now- that Christ died for us. We have the promise of eternal life when we take and eat of the bread that is Christ’s body. But the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given to us through God’s love, gives us eternal life. Eat, drink. Remember the source of light and life. Remember the one from whom all life flows. Each time you eat and drink give thanks for the true bread, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

² http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2007d/110207/110207e.htm (August 11,2012).

³ *Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), 335

12 Pentecost (Proper 14)

2 Samuel 18:5-9 & 15. 31-33; Ps. 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

August 12, 2018