

Homily – The Living Bread

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This is the fourth in a series of five weeks in a row in which our Gospel reading is about bread. We have been blessed to have several different preachers in this series for every preacher brings something a little different into the picture. Three weeks ago I included a lot of theology in the sermon about bread and included words like transubstantiation and transelementation. We looked at the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer. It was very much an in your head sermon with a lot of words. Then two weeks ago, Deacon Susan preached about her experiences with the bread and wine. She talked about the evolution of those experiences as she grew closer to God. And, she continued the theme of how the bread brings us into communion and community. Then last week Ken preached about how unitive consciousness is impacted by sex, drugs, and rock and roll. He talked about how the bread that comes from Jesus connects and unifies us in ways that can not be described by words.

This week we have another Gospel reading about bread. And, in this reading Jesus is once again teaching some pretty dense stuff. “Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”” This teaching is dense enough that, two thousand years ago, the Disciples didn't really understand it. And this is true for us today. Much about God is beyond our understanding. It is a mystery.

If you were here last week you heard Ken say that a hammer is the wrong tool to chop down a tree. He said if you hit the tree with a hammer for a year or two, it may damage the tree enough to cause it to finally fall over. But, a hammer is not the best tool. Likewise complicated theology might be necessary to begin understanding Jesus as the living bread, but if we stop with that tool we will never fully experience the mystery and wonder of Jesus.

Today, I want to make the case that we need to engage another tool or type of spiritual practice to experience and grow into the living bread. To lean into this beauty that God has created, we all need practices that instill silence, stillness, and solitude. These contemplative practices are the antidote to the things that separate us from God and others. Through these practices and tools we will more fully experience the living bread and the kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel reading is about another antidote to separation and this is with a dose of some very special food and drink. In today's teaching from Jesus, he shares the significance bread (and wine) should lead in our lives. In some mysterious way the bread and wine we use in the Sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, in

some way these become the body and blood of Christ. The bread and the wine are the perfect union of spirit and matter, a union that is the essence of Christ, the same Christ that we have throughout all of time and space. So, when we eat the bread and drink the wine we are putting Christ into our bodies in a very special way.

We all know that what we put into our bodies is important. Over indulgence in alcohol, misuse of drugs, and even the regular drinking of sugar water have a negative impact on our bodies. One of the reasons I like using the Blue Apron meal service is that I know exactly what is going into the meal. Jeff and I pay special attention to the foods we eat, though I have a reputation of being a bit more persnickety. Some of you tease me about this, but I have three categories of forbidden foods. First, there are foods that I think are gross like broccoli, cauliflower, beets, and mushrooms. Many of you like these foods but for me the ick factor is high. Last week I walked out of my house and I could smell that some farmer in the area was harvesting cilantro. I don't mind it but I know for some of you cilantro has a high ick factor. We will just have to agree to be different about our ick foods.

Then there are food allergies. All of our bodies are different, and my food allergies are soy and peanuts. I don't stop breathing, but allergy testing has revealed that soy and peanuts were doing some nasty things to my body. Maybe you have food allergies that you don't even know about. The third category of forbidden foods is food intolerances. A few years ago, I had some blood testing which showed me about a dozen foods to avoid if I wanted to lower inflammation in my body. This third category is annoying because they are foods that I like, and they are foods and spices that are in a lot of things. So maybe I am persnickety about food, but it feels healthy. Are you also careful about what you put into your body? Or maybe you are careful to avoid falls, or to get enough sleep, or not to drive at night, or to get exercise. We all have a list of do's and don'ts so that our bodies stay healthy. And, it seems like the list gets a longer as we get older. We take care because our embodied lives are important.

Our spiritual lives are also important. As human beings we all have a physical side of life, a mental side of life, and a spiritual side of life. I tried to illustrate with all that food stuff, we pay a lot of attention to our embodied lives, but many of us don't put as much care into our spiritual lives. Prayer, worship, Bible study, and service are all important spiritual practices. These are practices that we are pretty good at here at St. Barnabas. These common practices are all meaningful in leading us into healthier relationships with God, others, and self. But, as I wander through life, I am beginning to realize that contemplative spiritual practices are the component of life that most of us are missing. Contemplation in its many forms is a tool we all need to use more frequently.

The simple definition of the word contemplation is to think about an action before doing it. However, in the spiritual life, contemplation is an inner way of seeing that transcends rational thinking. It is a way to see God in and around all. If I've learned anything over the last few years it is that I have got to have regular practices of contemplation in my life. At the moment my goal is to have at least one twenty minutes session five days a week. We all need to incorporate prayer, meditation, and mindfulness into our daily living. And, through these contemplative practices we achieve silence, stillness, and solitude. As I said earlier these are the antidote to the things that ail us. This is the tool we need to lean into the living bread that we have from Jesus.

Now, I used to be afraid of silence. Yet all the ancient mystics understood that silence is vital to bringing the fragmented parts of self into a vibrant whole. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross wrote, "Silence is God's first language." Slowly, I've learned to appreciate its value in my own healing and growth, but there are still times that silence is that last thing that I want. Times of quiet can be hard, but these times invite us to consider ways of praying that are new to us.

Contemplation is a type of prayer that requires the full self, the whole person in the presence of God. This is a type of prayer that often doesn't use words. And, like I said there are times that I am afraid of silence. For you see, in silence, I'm unable to control my environment. In silence, I'm forced to face myself, allowing all my fears, shame, guilt, and resentments to come to the surface. In silence, my ambition and drive slow down just enough for my mind to come up with new thoughts, unwanted to-do lists, and more ideas that I know what to do with. Sometimes silence is just downright exhausting. In other words, silence is usually a huge workout for the soul.

But with practice come moments of breaking through the internal chaos. I experience the grace of letting go of my insecurities and fears of not being in control or liked. And then, with silence I find love. Love from God. Love for God. Love from others. Love for others, And, love from myself, and love for myself. Isn't this a bread of life you want for yourself and your loved ones?

Giving ourselves to silence, stillness, and solitude not only nurtures the inner spirituality our souls long for, but it also quiets the mind in a way that offers us the chance to make major corrections, walk slower, and lift our heads a little higher to see things we haven't seen before. Contemplative practices affect every part of us and our relationships. They change how we experience the bread and the wine. And, as we are transformed by this bread the world is changed.

Contemplative practices allow us to see God in the world all around us. Through the noise and busyness of life we lose sight of God. For many of us, our lives reflect this blindness. My understanding is that Christ is across all of time and space. Before the

beginning of time the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. And with creation Christ is in all and around all. Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Christ came into the world as a baby boy that we call Jesus. Jesus was and is the perfect union of human and divine. This is the presence that we see in the bread and the wine when we share Holy Communion. This is what we ingest into our bodies during the Eucharist. But here is a little secret that is not much of a secret. You and I are already the union of spirit and matter, just like Jesus. We are not perfect but we were created by God for beauty. With silence, stillness and solitude we are better able to see God, we are better able to experience the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, and we are better able to live into the beauty that God has created in each and every one of us. What you eat matters, and the tools you use to improve your spiritual health also matters. Eating the bread is life changing. May you thrive in body and spirit. And as we say in Communion, take this bread and drink this cup and you will have life everlasting.