

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2015
St. Paul's - Peoria, IL
The Rev. Jenny Replogle

*O God, take our minds and think through them,
take our lips and speak through them,
and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Despite having seen thousands of TV commercials in my lifetime, I have a memory etched into my mind of standing in front of the TV late in my high school years and watching a commercial. This one was calling for donations to help starving children, and it showed heartbreaking pictures similar to many I am sure you have seen of children with distended stomachs and bones nearly visible through skin.

The reason this particular commercial struck me was that I was beginning the crisis of faith that would continue for the next several years. I wrote in my journal something like, "Everything I am told at church is that what these children need is Jesus. They need someone to tell them how to ask Jesus into their hearts so that they won't go to hell.

"But I think what they really need is food. Shouldn't we give them something to eat?"

This may seem like a rather elementary thought for someone who was 17 or 18, and yes, it probably was. But for me at that time, it was a moment of rupture with what I had been taught. It was acknowledging to myself, in writing, that deep in my gut and in my heart I knew I could not accept the worldview I had been taught, and admitting that was scary.

Now, the truth is I doubt many people who taught me growing up would actually advocate for telling those children about Jesus without giving them something to eat, but the fact that I, a good church kid who listened and learned as much as I could, felt that this was what I had been taught gives you an idea of how belief can be elevated and separated from any other facet of life. I don't think this is uncommon in our world - separating Christianity into something 'spiritual', something elevated and apart from our daily lives, something we believe and feel, something that is really just meant for another world.

Over the next few years, I swung in the opposite direction and seriously explored going into nonprofit work because I just wanted to help people, and I believed that the nonprofit world was often more efficient than the church. All that mattered was putting beliefs into action, just making the world better. Some churches, Episcopal churches often among them, fall into this line of thinking as well, and it can be hard to explain how we are really different from any other social service organization.

We easily fall into a trap of focusing on the spiritual or the physical, often to the detriment of the other. Sometimes we realize this and we try to balance them, as if they are separate things. But they are not separate, and to live as if they are is to miss out on one of the most fundamental, one of the most beautiful parts of the Gospel.

This is something we hear throughout Scripture, especially in our Gospel passage today. In Hebrew, there is no word for 'spiritual'. But the Hebrew Scriptures are full of realities that we would call spiritual - experiences of talking to and with God, being caught up in the love and presence of God. This was simply reality. There was no separation between what we would deem physical and spiritual - that came later from the Greeks. For the Jewish people, it all just *was*. Reality was one thing, just simply all that is real and true; it was full of what we would now call the spiritual and physical, but they were no way of understanding them as separate. And this is the world that Jesus is born into, the worldview he would have been surrounded by and speaking to.

This truth is not just held by the Jewish people. There is no greater way that God could have affirmed this truth to us than the Incarnation. God became flesh and dwelt among us. The living God became flesh and blood and lived with us. This truth is fundamental for our Gospel today - it's what it is about. God became one of us.

As you may have noticed, there has been a theme going for the last four weeks. During this year of the lectionary, we take a step out of our ongoing reading of Mark and spend five weeks on John 6 - a passage all about bread. Because we dissect this one passage into multiple weeks, it's easy to focus in on each section and forget the context.

These discussions about Jesus as the bread of life, the living bread, are not abstract, spiritual discussions. This long passage starts out with a miracle - the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus does not explain the meaning of himself as the bread of life to be sure people understand before they eat. No! Jesus sees that people are hungry and from five loaves and two fish, he makes enough food so that five thousand people eat until they are full.

The words we read today are spoken to people who have been out in the hot sun, traveling all day, far from any food, and were given a meal and eaten to their fill. They are spoken to people who have just felt that wonderful rejuvenation and relaxation that comes when our hunger is satisfied.

This is something we know - something miraculous still happens when we break bread and share it. Conversation and time together can be had without food, but there is no doubt that gathering around food somehow changes what occurs. On a kitchen table, picnic blanket, or church altar, when humans gather around food, something sacred can happen.

To people with that experience, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven." We jump in today late in the dialogue, where Jesus gets very clear that he is talking about something that is not purely spiritual. He says, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

We are a little desensitized to this, since we talk about eating the body and blood of Christ every week. But think of how crazy, how awful this must have sounded then! Whereas before people were struggling with how Jesus was relating himself to the divine, now they cannot believe he is saying that they must eat his flesh.

To make it worse, he goes on to say that in order to have life, someone must eat his flesh and drink his blood. When he repeats himself, he actually uses another word for eat - he says those who gnaw, crunch, chew on his flesh will abide in him, and he in them.

While these passages do seem strange and cannibalistic even to our ears, and certainly to those who were first hearing them, I believe Jesus is being abundantly clear that he meets us right here, in our world, in a way as absolutely real as bread we have to chew.

Jesus did not come to bring us something merely spiritual, something that helps us escape from the realities of this world. He came to meet us in the reality of this world, in every person we meet, in washing dishes and mowing grass and getting groceries. He came to change our lives, our world, here and now.

And thank God for that! Because I need a faith that matters now, a faith that shows me the best possible way to live now, a faith that has something to offer for the struggles I see every day, and healing for the suffering that is all around us now.

I need a faith that speaks to the women trapped in sexual slavery in the Middle East, to people on both sides of the line in Ferguson, to the gay teenager and his parents struggling to find hope for his life. I need a faith that speaks to each of us, here in Peoria.

I need a faith that gives meaning to my life now. And this is what Jesus came to show us. I cannot believe that Jesus would have come and lived on this earth as a human being if life was simply something to get through to get to something better. Jesus came to live with us because this world was created good and God is inviting us to join in redeeming every bit of it. Jesus came to meet us in this reality, and it is only in this one reality that we can meet Jesus and have the life he came to bring us - life that begins here and now and goes on forever.

This life involves all of who we are - not our souls or minds or spirits or bodies alone - because those things are not actually separate. The life he brings is for our whole self, the hunger he fills in us is for every fiber of our being.

In John, this long passage we have studied over the past few weeks is the only discussion related to what we now understand as the Eucharist. The 'institution' stories, as we call them, the stories of the Last Supper the night before Jesus died, come from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And they are certainly fundamental to our understanding. But John gives us something extra, something deeper. John's discussion makes it clear that the Eucharist is as tied up in Jesus' life as in his death.

Our collect this morning says, "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, *and also an example of godly life*: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, *and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life.*"

In the eucharist, we are brought into how Jesus lived, a life that is all the fullness of what humanity was created to be, fully alive in every way, a life given to making God present and God's dream a reality more and more in this world. And so in the Eucharist, we are not only given life that goes on forever, life after death, we are given life that begins here and now, life as we were created to live.

Perhaps the most amazing thing in Jesus' discussion of himself as bread is how incredibly simple it is. How many prophets and books out there promise that they have the secret to changing your life, which is available if you are smart enough to understand or rich enough to pay? Like the feast offered by Wisdom in Proverbs, the life that God offers us has always been available to all, simple and wise, young and old, rich and poor.

It is always available and overflowing, always enough for us to eat and be full. Of course, there will always be more of the mystery to learn and understand, always more depth of wisdom as we dive into that mystery, but it is available to all who can come and eat this bread.

That is all it requires of us to begin this journey - and yet that is enough. We cannot know the life of Jesus by sitting and pondering it, by simply thinking and discussing. We must come hungry, put out our hands, put the bread in our mouth, and chew. And then we go out into our world and see others who are hungry, hold out our hands, and give them food to eat.

And in the midst of it all, Christ promises to be among us. Here, in our hunger and our feeding and our being fed, God will meet us.

So if you are hungry, come join the feast. Bring all that you are, all that you long for. Come and be fed.