

12 Pentecost, Proper 14, Yr. B

August 12, 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Our readings this morning continue the theme of bread. When we come upon Elijah in the first reading, we find him in a state of discouragement and despair. If you remember the story, that's a bit surprising because he's just come from winning a major victory over the priests of Baal. He won because Yahweh sent fire down upon Elijah's water-drenched sacrifice, while the god of the priests of Baal failed to respond to them in spite of their frenzied requires. Unfortunately (and this would be a sermon in and of itself) Elijah, after demonstrating to Israel that Yahweh was indeed the most powerful, the true God, then killed all the priests of Baal. And that action resulted in Jezebel, their patron, promising that she would, in turn, find Elijah and kill him, too. So, he's hiding in the desert, alone, morose, wishing that he could die. But God has other plans and sends an angel who invites Elijah to eat and drink. "Get up and eat." The angel says, "Otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Eating in order to have strength for the journey is the tie-in to the Gospel of John and Jesus' statement that he is the bread of life. In offering himself as that bread, though, Jesus does much more than give his followers sustenance either for journeys here on earth, or for that life-long journey, the pilgrimage to the Kingdom. He's offering himself as the bread that will satisfy for all eternity; those who eat of THIS bread, he says, will never die, but will live forever. Often in John's gospel, people who hear Jesus miss the point completely, like Nicodemus who think he really needs to be physically born again, or the woman at the well, who goes and gets a bucket when she hears about living water. Today's listeners miss the point as well – they get tangled up in questions of parentage – wait a minute, who is this guy- we know his folks – he's a carpenter, for Pete's sake. Bread of Life come down from Heaven? Please!

I think these scriptures invite us to think about life – what gives us life, what sustains us, what kind of life do we want? Remember Maslow's hierarchy of values? It's a pyramid of goods that lead to a fully human, fulfilled life.

At the very bottom, at the basic level, are the needs for physical life: things like food, water and shelter. Without those, all the other things – like experiences of self-realization or self-transcendence – aren't going to happen. Frederick Buechner puts it this way: MAN DOES NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, BUT HE ALSO DOES NOT LIVE LONG WITHOUT IT. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence – both on food and on each other. It also reminds us of other kinds of emptiness that not even the Blue Plate Special can touch.” (*Wishful Thinking*) So, food, yes, but then we're invited to go beyond, to satisfy other hungers. It's possible, however, to get stuck hungering for a lot of stuff that's really an equivalent to bread: things like wealth, or pleasure, or amusement or power, or even just more physical stuff. Way back when Alexis de Tocqueville was touring the US not long after independence, he observed both the restlessness “and the ‘strange melancholy’ of Americans in the midst of their prosperity.” “Americans, he said, cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.” (*Democracy in America*)

So, these texts pose lots of questions: what do I really need? What do I really want? What does it mean to have an abundant fulfilled life? Everyone will answer those questions in their own way, but let me give one example. Arthur Simon, who started Bread for the World, wrote a book in which he tells about being in Mozambique during a period of war and famine. He and some people working with him came upon a small camp of refugees who had fled their villages in search of food. Many had already died and the survivors were living in makeshift tents, foraging for berries and nuts and anything else that they could find to supplement the meager daily rations they received from CARE. They had nothing but the tattered clothes they wore and a few pots for cooking. But they were alive. Simon said his group spent some time listening to the gut-wrenching experiences these people had suffered but, when they got ready to leave, some of the women began dancing in a circle, singing and clapping, their faces beaming as they danced, chanting the same words over and over. When

asked what they were saying, the translator said, “We have food, we have clothes, we have everything!” So perhaps gratitude for everything we have is the place for us to begin our own questions about life.

The letter to the Ephesians is an answer to those larger questions. We pick up the letter just after the writer is talking about the change that takes place in people after Baptism. You’ll remember that Baptism then was almost always adult Baptism, and it required extensive preparation and commitment. The person would descend into the water, imitating death to the old self and then, after ascending from the water would be dressed in new clothing, symbolizing both the person and the new life they would be leading. Paul doesn’t make the statement that a person, once baptized, can never sin again, but he does say that that person has new resources in this new life, primarily the Holy Spirit and the Christian community. But this transformation doesn’t happen overnight, hence the need for forgiveness. Remember the story about the cucumber in the brine? It takes a long time, immersed in the right stuff, to become a pickle. Same with us, it takes a long time, immersed in the Christian community to become like Christ. If you read the list, you’ll note that what we’re exhorted to refrain from doing and what we’re exhorted to do, benefit both the individual and the community. Hence, speaking the truth, necessary for one’s own well-being and the health of the community. Not hanging on to, and obsessing over anger, letting it fester until it corrodes both the individual and the larger community. And the talk in the community is to be such that builds up rather than tears down. So, no bitterness, or wrath, or wrangling or slander, but kindness. I think it was someone like Ralph Waldo Emerson who was telling his nephew about the three tests for speaking: before you say anything, first ask, is what I’m about to say TRUE. Then is what I’m about to say NECESSARY? And lastly, is what I’m about to say KIND. I’m guessing that if we all applied those tests to our speech, there would be a lot more silence!

I’d like to end with a thought about kindness. Remember in the 90’s there was that movement that asked people to “Practice Random Acts of Kindness and Commit senseless Acts of Beauty”? I don’t think anyone quite knows how that all started, but one woman saw it in a restaurant and

another saw it on the wall of school, someone picked it up from there and taught to their students, and on it went, proving that kindness can build on itself just as much as violence can.

Julie sent me a picture of a poster that said IF WE ALL DO ONE RANDOM ACT OF KINDNESS DAILY WE JUST MIGHT SET THE WORLD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

We've all heard stories like the one about the woman who paid the toll over a bridge for the next six drivers, or someone who put money in a meter that was expiring. Small things, but things that affirm goodness. Things that enlarge our scope beyond ourselves and our immediate families to others, maybe even to strangers.

As spiritual seekers, our destiny is to live in the presence of God. That can be phrased many ways: we're trying to put on the life and mind of Christ, or to journey to God and holiness, to see the face of God, to be instruments of the coming of God's kingdom – however you phrase it, that's what we say an authentic life is about. And to travel that life, we need sustenance; we need bread. The bread of Eucharist, surely, but we also are fed in many other ways. There's story about a man who complained about the hiddenness of God to Jesus, "Rabbi," he said, "I'm an old man, I've kept the commandments my whole life, I've prayer, but I've not seen God. Why doesn't God show himself to me?" Jesus responded with a story about 3,000 kings who had called upon God to appear to them, but it never happened. But one day a pauper appeared and sat upon the kings' throne and said, 'God, the eyes of a human being cannot look directly at the sun, for they would be blinded. How then, Omnipotent, can they look directly at you? Have pity, Lord temper your strength, turn down your splendor so that I, who am poor and afflicted, may see you.' So God became a piece of bread, a cup of water, a warm tunic, a hut and, in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant.

From that perspective the Eucharist is a school for our yearning hearts – we begin with that assurance of God's presence in the bread and wine, we grown more and more able to discern God's face in all creation, able more

and more to live out our deepest calling, fully human beings living in God's presence and as instruments facilitating the coming of God's Kingdom.