Sermon, August 11, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

If you've been spending more time in Paris recently viewing the Olympics, you know the heart of most meals is the baguette, characterized by its slender, elongated shape, golden-brown crust, and tender, airy crumb. In Italy it's the ciabatta or focaccia; in the Middle East, it's the pita with pockets that allow it to be filled with a variety of meats, vegetables and sauces; in India, it's naan, a soft leavened bread intended to soak up a variety of spicy sauces and foods; in Germany it's a robust pumpernickel; in Russia and northern Europe it's a good rye; in Mexico, the beloved tortilla, thin round and pliable that makes a perfect wrap, and I could go on and on but I won't, with pardons to any culture I have overlooked.

Bread, often called the "staff of life," is one of humanity's most ancient and cherished culinary creations. It goes beyond borders, cultures, and centuries, holding a special place in the heart of nearly every cuisine across the globe. Here in the US, we have imported so many of these great breads from other cultures to replace our own staple that I grew up with and perhaps you too? That loaf of Wonder or Taystee Bread that I bicycled down to the local corner grocery to get. Maybe those weren't the good old days?

Bread in the time of Jesus was the essential, basic food. So basic was it that in Hebrew "to eat bread" and "to have a meal" is the same thing. Bread was treated with great respect and many rules existed to preserve that reverence. Bread was never to be cut, but always broken. The poor ate barley bread, the rich the bread of wheat. Because bread would become moldy very soon, one would only bake enough for a day or two. So it should be no surprise that Jesus identified himself in today's gospel as "the Bread of Life". He didn't call himself "the tomatoes of life", "the filet mignon of life", the "cheddar of life" "the apple pie of life" or even "the ice cream of life", as good as all those foods are. He called himself the Bread of Life because bread was so central to the sustenance of daily life and the making of it absorbed a significant part of the daily routine.

Many of the gospel passages featured Jesus at table with both rich and poor alike. And his Last Supper is something that the earliest Christians, who gathered first in a local home, remembered in the sharing of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine because it made

Jesus present and alive to them. As Christianity developed so did Eucharistic practices moving to a more formal liturgy of designated prayers in Latin and as a theology developed that emphasized individual sinfulness, people felt unworthy to actually eat the bread and thought all they worthily could do was look at it, to where the highlight of the Mass in the middle ages was when the priest elevated the host and people cried out, "Heave it Higher Sir priest" as those in the back of a large, dark church could not even get a glimpse. But Jesus today said "whoever eats of this bread will live forever", not whoever looks at it will live forever. If I invited you to my home for a meal and put out some nice soup, salad and bread on the table and all I did was invite you to stare at it and then leave, you might go home rather dissatisfied and hungry as well.

So how is Jesus today the Bread of Life for us? We have certainly continued eucharistic practice in our church and encounter Jesus in this way. Here is how Sarah Miles described her first experience of Eucharist in her book, "Take This Bread"

We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. "Jesus invites everyone to his table," the woman announced and then we gathered around that table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying "the body of Christ," and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying, "the blood of Christ," and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

Maybe you have had a similar experience to Sarah's, maybe you are still waiting, either way we keep on keeping on. But our practice is to have eucharist once a week on Sundays and we need to eat every day. How else do we encounter Jesus as the Bread of Life? Frederick Buechner offers this criticism:

". . . the church often seems to be a gathering of men and women who, whatever they find there, take so little of it out into the world with them that if one of them were to sit down at MacDonald's and say grace, or say or do anything to suggest that he or she is a Christian, the golden arches would shake with astonishment – and so, I suspect, would we."

Because bread is such a fabric of daily life in so many cultures, Jesus also needs to be part of daily, ordinary life. Which brings us to our serigraph on the bulletin cover. I felt this is so compelling, I used a lot of color toner to reproduce. I invite you to spend time with it at your leisure but note the angel Gabriel is on top and Mary is in the lower right hand corner feeding the chickens. The angel's message, that Mary will give birth to a child, Jesus, who will bring salvation to the world is not transmitted directly but through a community engaged in the chores of the fabric of daily life: plowing reaping, washing, baking, eating. As Gertrud Mueller Nelson said, "a spiritual life is not about

escaping the world and its daily requirements – it's about infusing the world with a vision of the holy". But to do that we need the vision ourselves, as the great Irish hymn sings, "Be Thou My Vision". And to have that vision we nned our spiritual practices: prayer, music, poetry, mediation, etc. to allow us to not see just bread, to not just see a simple carpenter's son, but to see Jesus, the bread come down from heaven.

Frederick Buechner again,

"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"

The Living Bread from Heaven has come to fill that emptiness. Come, take and eat.