

PROPER 15, PENTECOST 12, AUGUST 15, 2021

The last several weeks the gospel readings have all been about Jesus referring to himself as the bread of life. Even next weeks gospel continues the theme. It begs the question why do we have to hear that Jesus is the bread of life so many times. What else can we say about it or interpret what Jesus means when he says I am the bread of life.

To put it in a nutshell, the purpose is to emphasize that to be fed and nourished in ways that feeds our souls, minds and bodies is the only way to live or should live our lives. So, the kind of nourishment we embark on a daily basis is a choice. What do we feed on to enrich our bodies, souls and minds? What choices do we make about who we will follow? And if we choose to follow God do, we understand that that choice is really hard?

In the Old Testament lesson this morning, Solomon had a choice when God asked him what he wanted. He could have chosen wealth and power but instead he asked God for a discerning mind and heart in order to govern with integrity and righteousness. How many of us given that choice between riches and power would choose discernment? Doesn't power and money give us all the discernment we need? Doesn't it allow us to help others if we choose? Therein lies the problem because wealth and power far too often have the capacity to corrupt the individual and the choices made are not always beneficial to others and the greater good.

That same message is behind Paul's message to the people of Ephesus. "Be careful how you live," Paul says to them. "Live not as unwise people but as wise." In every age we must decide how we will live. We must decide what is life giving, what is worth putting time and energy and talent into. Paul is writing to a community not unlike our own. They lived with many choices. It was a city with a fascinating and varied life. One could be drawn into its sophistication, its affluence, its commerce, its cosmopolitanism. Paul is asking them to make good choices for themselves as Christians in a secular society. He is not condemning the society in which they live. He is just telling them that life can be wasted on unworthy purposes, or it can be lived creatively and triumphantly. We can put God on a shelf, or we can make God central in our lives. We can let the essence of Christ permeate through us or not.

What does it mean to choose God? According to Jesus, it means "eating" his very essence, into our own bodies and souls that we exude the nature of Christ to the world. It means doing what Jesus did and living as Jesus lived. It means turning the other cheek. It means loving our enemies. It means walking the extra mile. It means losing our lives in order to gain them. It means trusting that the first will be last and the last first. It means seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness. It means denying ourselves. These are hard choices to make. There is nothing simple or easy about following Jesus and we fool ourselves if we think it is.

This is what Jesus is saying about himself in today's Gospel as he calls himself the Bread of Life. We have all heard the expression "You are what you eat." Think of Jesus' words in those terms. What is it that we feed on every day? What is our diet like? What choices do we make from the tables that are spread before us? What flavors are we ingesting?

Too often it seems people who should know better - and that includes me - feed on the food that creates worry and anxiety, selfishness and intolerance, hatred and despair.

You are what you eat and if your only bread is the bread of envy, and your only drink is the drink of bitterness you become those things. A little junk food doesn't hurt a person; most of us - but not all of us - can safely consume potato chips and candy, hot dogs and soda, pizza and chocolate bars - but - if we don't balance this all out in the other direction of fruit and vegetables, milk and eggs, water and meat, then our health will begin to fail, and we will suffer problems that we do not need to suffer.

Throughout the scriptures God's word - first the spoken and then the written word, and finally Jesus, are compared to food - to bread - to drink - because in them there is life and through them comes a full and abundant and rich life. That is what we are called to feed on. We need to balance the junk food of what we get bombarded with on a daily basis with the rich healthy food of the kind Jesus offers.

Recently I read someone speculate if Jesus's desire to feed us, to be our bread, as perfect nourishment, is anything like young mothers who are nursing their babies. These nursing babies receive the essentials of nutrition, warmth, affection and protection derived from their mother's bodies. It might not be the best analogy but I daresay it comes close. Jesus desires to feed us with the basic nutrients that will give us a full and abundant life.

So what happens when we don't get the nourishment we need or refuse the "bread of life"? Just this week I read a story by an Episcopal priest, Debie Thomas, who recounts this story about her daughter. She writes:

"When my daughter was twelve years old, she slowly stopped eating. The descent was gradual: first, no desserts or sweets. Then, no carbs. Then, no between-meal snacks. Then, no meat. Eventually, no meals at all. Just pitiful little bites, scattered and useless. A single grape. One carrot stick. A tablespoon of plain yogurt or iceberg lettuce. Barely enough to sustain life.

Wrecked by anxiety, perfectionism, and American culture's toxic obsession with thinness, our daughter had developed anorexia nervosa, one of the deadliest of all mental illnesses. Within a matter of months, our family dining table became a battlefield. Grocery shopping became an exercise in desperation and agony. All attempts at persuasion failed, and my husband and I faced the real prospect that our child might starve herself to death in the name of what her illness insisted was "health."

There are no words to express what I felt as a mother as I watched my child waste away. All I wanted in the universe was to feed her. To cook anything she'd eat, to place warm and nourishing plates of food in front of her and coax her — even if it took hours — to take those essential nutrients into her weakened body. When she kept refusing, my heart broke, hardened, and broke again. Too many times to count. I panicked. I seethed. I grieved. I begged. I experienced a kind of powerlessness I hope never to experience again. I was *her mother*. The one who was supposed to nurture, nourish, feed, protect, and sustain my children. What was this monstrous sickness that made basic, elemental feeding impossible?"

She goes on to say that "all these years later, my daughter is no longer as sick as she once was. She's so much better. But eating disorders cast long shadows, and she still struggles to eat enough. She might struggle all her life. Which means I might, too. Bearing witness. Trying to help. Hoping. Fearing. Praying.

But then Debie goes on and reflects on how her encounter with her daughter and dealing with anoxia nervosa isn't unlike what Jesus is saying to us in today's Gospel

lesson. He certainly doesn't mince words when he says, " Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

She continues, "I know that his words sound harsh and unforgiving, but I wonder if we might hear them as the desperate words of a parent who knows exactly what makes for life and what makes for death — and longs to spare his children the latter. I wonder if Jesus sounds the alarm so urgently because he knows how much and how badly we need the nourishing, life-sustaining food he alone can provide. I wonder if he, too, grieves and weeps, seethes and pleads, fears and hopes, when we walk away from his table, refuse his bread, and say no to his outstretched hands. I wonder how he sits with the terrible cost of the freedom he's given us to starve ourselves if we so choose. I wonder how our Mother God yearns to gather us around her table, coax the bread of life into our mouths, and watch us once again thrive and flourish under her care.

"Whoever eats me will live because of me," Jesus says. He is our bread, He is our bread of life. Our lectionary asks us to linger over this truth for a reason; this teaching is elemental. It is rock bottom. It is the core of who God is, and who we are. May we always eat of the bread of life, and live this truth. Amen.