

8-8-21

Pentecost 11

John 6:35, 41-51

Communion

Wonder Bread

Like many of you did, I grew up in the middle part of the country, far from either coast. Louisville and Nashville were the cities that were two and three hours away, but that was a lot farther in those days than it seems to be now. We didn't go to either one of them very often. The really exciting things happened out on the west coast, particularly in California, and, of course, in New York on the east coast. Nothing very noteworthy happened in our middle part of the country. We got the Derby on the first Saturday in May, and Kentucky usually caused a stir in the basketball tournament in March most years, but, for most of the year, we lived in the shadow of both coasts. We saw ads for things we couldn't buy, and it always seemed like there were things going on in those more exciting places that didn't involve us. Most of the music we listened to came from either coast. Most of what we watched on TV came from there. We didn't see people on TV who lived where we did. They went surfing. If we were lucky, we got to water ski once in a while. They went to shows on Broadway and ate in restaurants a lot different than the ones we knew. The world we saw and the world we were led to believe we wanted was much different than the one where we lived.

One of those ads that I remember seeing was for Wonder Bread. They used to advertise on TV and in comic books and other things we read when we were kids. They still do. But I don't think I have ever bought a loaf of Wonder Bread. Where I grew up, we ate Bunny bread and bread from Colonial bakery. I'm not sure what I thought the difference was between the plain

old bread we could buy where I lived and the Wonder Bread that was apparently available in the important places. That was something else that we didn't have, and others did. But we thought that Wonder Bread, like everything else from somewhere else, was, well, wonderful! And we thought it was even more so because we couldn't have it, and someone else could. It turns out, of course, that Wonder Bread is just bread. And it's white bread, at that, which most of us have decided is not as wonderful as we once thought it was. I still prefer my tomato sandwiches on plain white bread, but, more often than not, I choke them down on the cardboard, whole wheat stuff we're supposed to eat these days.

People in Jesus' day were not a lot different from us. Bread was a staple of their diet, but they baked it at home. It didn't come in a fancy, bright-colored wrapper from the store. Every day, the women in every community made something we might call pita or flatbread. Somedays they didn't eat much beyond bread. Maybe some olive oil, but bread was pretty routine and vitally important to them. I'm sure they thought that people in the important places did better. Places like Jerusalem where the Temple was, where important things happened. But most people's lives were different than what happened there.

That's why no one was quite sure about what to make of Jesus when he came with different things to say than they had heard from the ones who were supposed to be taking care of their spiritual welfare. They knew they were God's Chosen people. God had always provided for them. And God always would. They were sustained by stories about how God had provided for their ancestors on their long journey to this land where they now lived. Bread in the wilderness. It had been the difference between life and death for them. Yes, they grumbled, but they learned to trust in God's provision, and that provision did not fail them. But now, generations later, those stories had become part of that faraway place where important things happened. Here was different. Here there was just living, and it wasn't easy. Day after day,

people hoped, and day after day it became harder to hold onto that hope.

Then Jesus came, and somehow things sounded different. He reminded them that it hadn't been Moses who provided that life-giving bread; it was God, and God was now providing food of a different sort for them, food that would sustain them forever, food that would even carry them to life everlasting. Of course, everyone who heard Jesus talk about this wanted some of it. Give us this bread always, they cried out to him. And that's when things got really strange.

I am that bread, he told them. I am the bread of heaven. I am the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Like many things he said, no one was quite sure what to do with that. How could he be bread? He even talked about giving them his flesh to eat. That couldn't be true, could it?

The people who were supposed to understand these things said he was nuts. When he talked about coming from God, they had heard enough. They encouraged people to leave him alone, and they promised to be rid of him soon. This was, after all, just Jesus. Many of them knew him. He had grown up among some of them. He was Joseph's son, the son of a carpenter. Somewhere along the way, he had gotten full of himself and had developed quite a following. There was something about him that people just couldn't set aside. As wonderful as that story they all depended on was, that story of how God or Moses or whoever it was had provided for them in the wilderness—as wonderful as that story was, they had to admit that all those people had died. That generation had seen wonderful things, but they were all gone now, and generation after generation has followed them. But now Jesus had come talking about something that was supposed to sustain them in a different way, something that would bring them life everlasting. Whether they understood it or not, they all wanted some of this wonder bread he promised.

There really did seem to be something that drew people to him. Even the things they didn't understand seemed to somehow

call them to try to comprehend what he meant. Some of them had heard him teach before, and they had come to understand that what he said was not always exactly what he meant. So there was something intriguing about this bread of life thing he was saying now.

It still intrigues us after all these years. Every month we gather at this Table, knowing what will be here. The invitation never promises a lavish buffet or whatever is in season prepared in some special way. We know that when we get here it will be bread and juice. That's it. But we keep coming. Because there is something on this Table we need, something we can't continue living without. We've pretty much stopped arguing with our Catholic brothers and sisters about what this really is we're eating. We were never going to win that argument, and neither were they. We know this is bread and juice. But we also know that this is the bread of life.

I've used lots of different kinds of bread to celebrate this Sacrament. At one church, Amelia Ann Queiry used to get up early on Communion Sundays and bake bread for our celebration. She would bring it to the sanctuary in a basket while it was still warm, the aroma slipping out of the napkin she wrapped it in and filling the whole room. By the time the sermon was over and the celebration began we were all about to fall to our knees hungry for the gift she brought. Jesus would tell us, of course, that Amelia Ann didn't really feed us on those Sundays, God did, but God sure used Amelia Ann in a mighty way. In another church, another woman drew the responsibility for preparing the Table, but she found little joy in it. She cut cubes of regular sandwich bread, crusts removed, of course, and arranged them just so. And if there was a wrinkle in the tablecloth, the day was ruined for her. I tried to stay out of the sanctuary while she was laying it all out. The complaining about how hard she worked and how little anyone appreciated it took all the joy out of it. Fear that we might spill a drop or a crumb was not a theological issue; we just didn't want to hear how hard she had to work to clean up after us. I don't think she ever understood that this is a joyful

feast we celebrate. Then there was a middle school friend of Kyle's who brought his family to our church because he and Kyle were friends. Our way of doing things was new to him, and he was confused when he learned that the bread we used there came from the grocery store and that I usually picked it up on my way to church that morning. In his mind, the bread of heaven didn't come from the grocery store. I'm not sure where it was supposed to come from, but it took him a while to adjust.

If Jesus is, as he says he is, the Bread of Life, the bread that comes down out of Heaven, then he is somehow present in all those forms and in every other way that we can imagine celebrating the bounty of this Table. There is something about this bread that we know we can't live without. Something we know we must have to survive. Jesus said that if we eat this bread we will live forever.

One of the joys of this celebration is that Jesus intends for all of us to participate in it and benefit from it. This is not something that happens where the important people are, not something that happens where people and things matter more than they do in other places. This is the bread that came down from heaven and gives life to the world because we are all invited to eat it. There's a song we sometimes sing at Christmas time that talks about why Jesus came among us. He came down that we may have love, the song says. He came down that we may have light. That we may have joy. He came down that we may have peace. Jesus Christ is the gift-giving bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. That song gives us a joyful response, hallelujah forevermore! Hallelujah forevermore indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of both compassion and challenge, hear our prayers today. Hear us as we give thanks for all the ways we have experienced your presence among us in recent days. For the break in the heat that we know won't last, but for which we are grateful beyond words. For the transitions that come with a new school year, for

the order of regular schedules that we'll need some time to adjust to again, but for which we will learn to be thankful. For recollections of fun times summer brought and for anticipation of what is yet to come. For the promise that you are with us when everything around us grows more confusing. For all these things we give you thanks and praise.

Hear our prayers for all who are struggling in these days. Some face addiction and its power. Some face uncertain finances. Some live in painful relationships. Some still search for meaning and purpose in their lives. We pray for these and for all the ways we struggle to be faithful.

We pray for all who grieve in these days. Some have lost loved ones to disease, but others have lost some they love to hatred and intolerance. Some have fallen out of relationships simply because those relationships are too difficult to maintain. We pray for comfort for all who grieve, whatever their loss.

We pray for all who have grown too comfortable with this life, for those who are confident that they have earned all they have amassed and that they are entitled to it. For those who strive to make a name for themselves, for those who climb to the top of whatever ladder they think will get them above others. We pray for some who think they've arrived and have nothing else to accomplish. We pray for humility and for honesty for all of us because we all find ourselves too comfortable with this world sooner or later.

Hear our prayers for your church today. We pray for churches that are full of people and full of life. We pray for churches that are not, for those who dwindle and wonder what will come. We pray for churches that thrive and for those who struggle. We pray for churches that are somewhere in between all that. We pray for pastors and elders as we face yet another phase of these strange times we've experienced for so long. Give us vision. Give us rest. Give us courage to face what comes next.

Hear us, O God, as we pray for ourselves. We pray that worship may enliven us and give us hope. We pray for the anxiety that grips us and wants us to believe we can't go on. We pray for

some who have stopped feeling altogether and for those who feel only dread and worry. Help us to help each other find hope and peace and to find them in you. Help us to share both our burdens and our joys. Make our relationships with one another genuine and real so that they can weather both good times and bad. Now hear us as we pray with one voice as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: