

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday August 5, 2018 Proper 13B
Text: John 6: 24-35
Preacher: The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Title of Sermon: Devouring Jesus

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty." - John 6:35

This is the time in our liturgy for the sermon. For the most part people settle back into their seats and become attentive, listening to the preacher's reflections on the readings for the day (or we preachers like to tell ourselves this.) Some watch the clock, some are busy thumbing through the hymnal and others attend to or ignore their children's pleas for attention or requests to slip out to the bathroom, while others are taking brief but much needed naps. More and more I notice that people can't stop checking their phones for some sort of important message, as if humans cannot survive for an hour without their screens and messages from beyond the present moment. As a culture we're losing the skills required for reverence and quiet, and nothing good can come of that, and great harm has already. Oh, but I'm meddling again in your "freedoms."

Sermons are made of words and for the most part on our best days we are ready to receive these words. We roll the words over in our minds, pondering what the homilist is trying to say and how it might connect to our lives. Sermons are different than the music and hymns. Music often touches us emotionally reaching our heart before our mind. But sermons are offerings of speech that tease the mind into active thought. While music and hymns may be more about the language of the heart, sermons often seem to be about the life of the mind.

But if sermons are meant to be cognitive exercises what are we to do with a story like the one Jesus delivers to the crowd today?

Here we are again talking about bread in John's Gospel. How many weeks in a row is bread the topic? Don't answer that. Jesus has fed the hungry multitudes. The people are seeking to get near Jesus. They are hungry and the truth is that he has fed them before. But Jesus is not trying to start up a Great Harvest Bread franchise. He is trying to take the conversation deeper, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you (John 6:27)." Jesus is trying to shift their consciousness but they are stuck in the everydayness of life. It's easy to be stuck in the everydayness of life, in the practical matters, the tasks in front of you, the ever-present demands on your time, the complaining of others, the dishes in the sink, the laundry piling up, the work waiting on your desk.

The crowd around him hears his words and remembers the powerful story of bread in the wilderness, when God provided bread for them in the form of manna. This ancient and

defining story reminds them of who they are and begins to pull them into a conversation about God's provision. But Jesus is still trying to get them to not only remember the mighty deeds of God in the past but to become alive to them in the present. Jesus tells them of the "true bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:33)." The context is one in which there were a lot of people who knew what real honest-to-goodness hunger was like. Most Middle Eastern farmers worked every day eking out an existence in the dry soil just to put some bread on the table for their families. Famines were not uncommon in the land, so you can imagine the excited response when Jesus mentions bread. How wonderful it would be to have someone who could provide us bread miraculously, instantly. The people are interested and ask Jesus to provide this bread. "Sir, give us this bread always," the people say sensing that Jesus has something more to offer.

The people of God have been concerned about the problem of hunger since people had appetites. Even in our affluent land of plenty, many go to bed hungry – particularly the very old and the very young. In New Mexico 1 in 4 children experience hunger regularly, that is a sad New Mexico truth. Jesus provided bread for the hungry multitudes and as people of faith we cannot worship the living God without making bread a spiritual concern and an area of real ministry within our community. I do not believe that it is ok to celebrate a feast of bread and wine each week as God's continual nourishment of us and then not take the hunger of others seriously. The Altar and the World are to be connected.

This whole teaching moment opens a space for Jesus to make a startling statement about himself. Into the hunger of the crowd Jesus speaks these strange and metaphorical words, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6: 35)."

This is Jesus at his most poetic and explicit. Jesus does something very odd, he points to himself as the one who can really fulfill our needs. The bread we need is Jesus. The sustenance we seek in our lives is somehow mysteriously linked to him and in telling this to the crowds, Jesus does something strange and evocative. In effect Jesus says, "You want some bread? I am bread. Feed on me." Jesus is the divine life of God, the source of all life made available to humankind in a most surprising way. It's a wild claim. If you think Christianity is a tame religion then you have been experiencing a domesticated Jesus, a sanitized savior instead of the wildest being in existence. We could all stand to chew on this truth for a while. Let's let the yeast do its work and let something rise into our consciousness anew.

It really is a striking metaphor that Jesus makes about himself. "I am bread." We are not simply to believe in him, or to follow him. We are to devour him, feed on him. We are to regard Jesus in the same way that we do bread – as utterly necessary for life.

This passage reminds me of a wonderful experience I had in New Orleans with one of the members of our youth group. This young woman who was about 16 called my office one

day and said that she wanted to make an appointment. As not that many teenagers call their priests for appointments I was intrigued and wondered what she wanted to talk about. Did she need a reference letter or was she looking for community service projects, what did she want? So, I asked her what she wanted to talk about. She said, “I want to come and talk to you about Jesus.” I was stunned. It was so wonderful I wasn’t quite sure that it was real. We clergy-types do a lot of things from planning worship to puzzling over budgets, worrying about the buildings, to attending a myriad of meetings, to listening deeply to people’s lives to filling out paperwork and preparing for classes. But talking about Jesus is not on the schedule all that often. I was giddy as I wrote it down in my calendar, Thursday 3:30 meet with Yasmine to talk about Jesus. That was an appointment I was not going to miss.

The surprising truth is that this is the conversation that we really come to church to have. We want to talk about Jesus. We want to get to know this person who is bread for the life of the world. And if the truth be told we don’t really want to settle for nice ideas about Jesus. We want to know Jesus on a level that is personal and makes a difference in our lives. We want to grow in loving relationship with God in Christ. We want to become a friend of God by getting to know the one who manifest God to the world most clearly.

I remember a story of two preachers talking. One was lamenting how his congregation didn’t seem to remember the ideas in his sermons even right after they had been delivered. He had handed out pieces of paper and pencils to people right after the service asking them to write down the ideas they remembered from the sermon and some turned the papers in blank. He was exasperated and frustrated about his failure to get his ideas across or to communicate with his people. The other pastor responded with something that startled and delighted, “I am not so interested in attempting to deliver ideas to my people. I would rather provoke among them an experience, an experience of the presence of the risen Christ. That’s why I preach – to foster a relationship, a passionate, engaging relationship, not to have them think about ideas.”^[1]_{SEP}

Each Sunday morning, we come to church expecting that we are going to hear some ideas about Jesus. We hope the ideas will be interesting. We may hope that the ideas will be congruent with ideas that we have had about Jesus previously and not too upsetting.^[1]_{SEP} But today’s Gospel suggests that the main thing we get, during the liturgy, including the act of worship that is the sermon, is not ideas about Jesus but Jesus himself. Let’s be honest. Sometimes we have ideas about Jesus – we debate which ideas that we have about Jesus are orthodox or unorthodox – in an unconscious attempt to avoid Jesus. Ideas about Jesus can be less threatening than Jesus. Jesus in today’s Gospel does not debate his critics or his friends on their ideas. Rather he makes an astounding statement about himself. He says that he is bread. He doesn’t ask us to agree with him or to understand him. He asks us to ingest him. **We are to relate to Jesus in much the same way that we relate to a loaf of home-cooked bread straight out of the oven.** We are to relate to Jesus the same way that a person who hasn’t eaten in weeks responds when a meal is set before her.

Jesus is not content to let us stand back with our arms folded and coolly, dispassionately consider him. He wants us to embrace him. He wants to embrace us. He wants us not simply to agree with him but to feed on him.^[17] The test of a sermon is not whether I succeed in presenting a group of worthwhile ideas in a coherent way. The test of the sermon is what you do with the sermon, or more specifically, what you allow the sermon to do with you! A sermon is validated in its performance. The Christian faith is not meant just to be pondered, coolly and dispassionately; it is meant to be performed, enacted. These are ideas that are meant to be incarnate in our lives. The bread that we receive from Jesus is meant to be bread for the world: The bread of love, The bread of forgiveness, The bread of compassion, The bread of kindness and care. The thoughts that we have in church are meant to sprout wings, feet, helping hands. We are to receive these words in much the same way we receive food. We are to allow them to nourish us by getting deep inside of us, by flowing through us, by becoming so much a part of us that it is an experience too deep for words.

Our presiding bishop Michael Curry is fond of talking about the Jesus Movement and I deeply appreciate his Crazy Christians emphasis on Jesus. I think it is a wonderful, this placing of Jesus at the center. If you've never read Christ the Center by Dietrich Bonhoeffer you should put it on your theological bucket list. You do have a theological bucket list, don't you? I would like for we Episcopalians to get to know Jesus better, to be on more intimate terms with the bread of life. I think it would be fantastic if instead of arguing about what this political party or that political party thinks we talked about what Jesus taught, what Jesus did, how Jesus loved, who Jesus had compassion for. Christians believe that truth is found in a person not a platform. Including Jesus in the conversation can make things awkward and convicting: Who would Jesus bomb? Who would Jesus deport or separate from their family? Whose healthcare would Jesus eliminate? Who deserves the best education according to Jesus? What part of God's creation would Jesus despoil and foul? Next to what communities would Jesus place a toxic factory? What would diplomacy look like if the bread of life was at the table?

If you think your political party is following Jesus, well I've got some rather troubling news for you, wake up and devour some more Jesus. Jesus doesn't care one bit about what political party you are from but he does care about how you love those around you, how you advocate for the most vulnerable, how you defend those who are different from you, how you raise up those who have been beaten down by life and our culture and the system, how you fight for those who are at such a disadvantage they can't even see the starting line and don't know where it is. Jesus talked to outsiders, welcomed strangers into his makeshift family, touched the untouchables, talked back to the empire and the powers and principalities. Jesus did not seem to appreciate the status quo one bit, in fact he was constantly pointing out that the way things are is not the way that God desires for them to be. If Jesus was bread, he was a spicy loaf. He was a Green Chile biscuit or a Habanero Challah. He was yeasty and feisty and full of the spirit.

Knowing Jesus and making Jesus known is the point of our life together. Listen to the words of Gordon Cosby the founding pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. and one of the most profoundly Christian men I have ever met. He and his wife

lived and worked in the inner-city of Washington DC doing extraordinary work in social justice and community building since the end of World War II. He said this in an interview:

If one longs for depth in one's life we must focus on a very few things. There is so little time in one's brief lifetime. And what is that one thing? We are saying that it is Jesus. I choose to go deep-sea diving in that ocean. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Is that true or false? By faith I say that it is true, I give my entire life to that deep exploration. I want to know him in depth and to be transformed into his likeness. It is that likeness, the likeness of Christ that I want to have when I embark on a journey to the Land beyond death. There are infinite depths in Christ to explore. Our task is to be so deeply and intimately connected with Christ as a community that the world will experience the resurrected Christ – the newness God intends – whenever it touches our corporate life.

The Rev. Gordon Cosby – Church of the Savior

I'm not sure that there is a better way to say, devour Jesus, more bread of life please. This world is so hungry and so are you.

All this talk of bread and Jesus puts me in mind of a poem by Mary Oliver that I treasure. It might just make a fitting end to this rambling sermon about devouring Jesus. It is entitled:

The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist

*Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.*

*They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward*

*to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.*

*They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.*

*I want
to see Jesus,
maybe in the clouds*

*or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man*

*and clearly
someone else
besides.*

*On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.*

*Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.*

–Mary Oliver

*Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty.” - John 6:35*

*I wish to acknowledge my deep debt to The Rev. William Willamon and his writing on
this passage. May we find ourselves relating to Jesus in the same way that we relate to a
freshly baked loaf of homemade bread, an image from Willamon that has captured my
appetite.*