

Proper 14, Year B
August 9, 2009
Good Shepherd, Berkeley
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I Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:1-8
Eph. 4:25-5:2
John 6:37-51

I'm not sure that someone on a low carb diet has a right to stand in front of you today and say anything meaningful about this gospel. But I'll give it a go and try to avoid any semblance of low carb spirituality. Our gospel text today asks us to consider Jesus, the Bread of Life as the center of faith, the one to whom and through whom God draws us into eternal life. I've chosen the second option from the Hebrew Scriptures to pair with this, the story of the prophet Elijah, burned out and on the run, experiencing what Rabbi Ed Friedman would call a failure of nerve, but then, fed by God's own nurturance, Elijah finds the strength he needs to go the final lap.

Back in the '90's I was a participant in a national leadership development program that met annually over the course of four years. Our group had grown very close and in fact most of us still meet these 16 years later for a monthly conference call. At the closing Eucharist of our final gathering we knew that we would all go our separate ways and not meet as a group, perhaps ever again. At that Eucharist, Marianne Borg was the celebrant. Instead of the usual words of the invitation – "The gifts of God for the People of God," she said a variation of the words we heard the angel say to Elijah in today's first lesson: "Take, eat, lest the journey be too much for you. This is the Body of Christ." Broken open by the grief of relationships ending I heard those words as I'd never heard them before. And they have continued to echo around in my soul as an exquisite articulation of what Eucharist means – food for the journey, the Bread of Life

is Bread *for* life. Broken and shared in community the Eucharistic meal Christians share gives us strength for the journey ahead.

Today is the third bread reading in a row and just in case we go on vacation or stop paying attention, we've got two more weeks of it to come. Through these continuous readings from John's gospel, the church invites us to consider some of the core gospel texts that form our Eucharistic theology.

Last week Peggy asked us to consider the question, "what does it mean to believe *in* Jesus?" Well, that question led me to one of my own, coming from today's texts – do Christians know what the Bread of Life is made of? If your first thought is Jesus Christ, then you are, of course, right. That both says it all and it can say not much of anything. For if we do not know who Jesus Christ is, if we have not experienced his life lived in us and know his story as it intersects with our story, then indeed, we do not know what the Bread of Life is made of. In one of his sermons St. Augustine said "Be what you can see, receive what you are. If you are his body and members of him, then you will find set on the Lord's table your own mystery."

But what exactly does this mean, to know Jesus Christ, to find in the Bread of Life our own mystery; or, to follow up on Peggy's question, to believe in Jesus? I think it means different things at different stages of our lives. But of all the myriad things we might say, I'd like to identify four things we must know and experience of Jesus if we are to know anything about him at all. Think of them, if you will, as four ingredients in the Bread of Life. They are: presence, engagement, forgiveness or letting go, and community.

The presence of Jesus is the presence of the One sent by God. Two different times in this morning's Gospel lesson we hear "I have come down from heaven, not to do

my own will but the will of him who sent me." (v.38) and again, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." (v.51) This is the profound mystery of the Incarnation which is so exquisitely imaged over and over again in the Fourth Gospel. In Christ God has become one of us. And his listeners don't get it. They say, "How can this guy say he's the bread of life? Isn't this Jesus? Don't we know his father and mother? Furthermore how can he say he comes down from heaven? We know that he comes from Nazareth, which is pretty far down the street from heaven!"

In setting up the scene this way, John invites his readers to say back to those unbelievers "Of course! That's exactly the point! He's an ordinary human being. But he's also God – Bread of Life come down from heaven." He makes God present, here, among us. He does it in his stories, ...once upon a time there was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho...once upon a time there was a grain of mustard seed...once upon a time there was an old woman who lost a coin... He does it in his teaching...consider the lilies of the field...blessed are the poor...I am the Bread of Life. Jesus makes God present among us in nurturing when he feeds 5000 people on a hillside. He makes God present in miracles of healing and conversion. He is the presence of the holy in very ordinary things – life of God in bread and wine. Barbara Crafton wrote in her blog entry for this Sunday: "Take and eat, Jesus says, and let your simple bread become me. Don't let a single thing in your life, however ordinary a thing it may be, remain untouched by your new life in me. Don't think for a moment that it is an ordinary thing; there are no ordinary things. Allow your eternal life to transform *this* life, so that the two are one thing, a seamless garment."

I have a confession to make. This sermon was veering dangerously close to the

edge of boring me at this point in its writing. I couldn't find the juice it needed, the point in the crafting of a sermon when it begins to take on a life of its own, the point where the Holy Spirit gets into the computer and says, "Come on girl, I've got something to *say* to my beloved sheep, there on the corner of Hearst and Ninth." But, you'll be glad to know that She showed up, and this is what God's Girlfriend has to say to you:

Engagement. Good Shepherd is a little like Elijah. That prophet was tired, maybe even a little burned out. He'd just been chased over half the countryside by King Ahab. He was in a contest with the prophets of Baal and killed all 450 of them, ended a drought, and when we meet him in this morning's lesson Elijah is on the run from Queen Jezebel who has threatened to kill him for killing her prophets. So he flees into the wilderness, lays himself down under a broom tree in the desert and prepares to die. He had been majestic, powerful, a successful advocate of Yahweh. Yet in our text today he's beaten down, full of self-doubt, unable to access courage for the next step.

Notice this, however. When the prophet listens to his dreams and accepts the ministrations of angels, he is transformed from fugitive to pilgrim. Our first glimpse of him this morning is running from danger. By the end of the story he is on his way to a holy place. When the angel touches him with her message and her command, the goal of Elijah's journey is not emphasized, nor is any new purpose for the trip mentioned. What we see, then, is a lesson for us – the encounters with divine messengers and the acceptance of life-sustaining gifts take place *on the way*.

Let me repeat that for you, God's tired and maybe even burned-out Good Sheep. Encounters with the divine messenger and acceptance of life-sustaining gifts take place **on the way**, the way **through** the wilderness, the way forward into the future God holds. Hear again the message of the angel – Take and eat, lest the journey is too much

for you, and receive at this table food for the journey. Engage this journey. Be on it, not as passive travelers in a conveyance someone else is driving. **You** discern where God calls you and build a ministry together that will take you there.

Forgiveness and letting go. Last week Peggy was pretty courageous in naming some realities in our life together. She talked about lingering hurt and resentment, guilt and regret, anger and self-righteousness. She said we've felt burned and burned out and charged us to let go our "recreational resentments." This is the major work of the interim time, letting go the past, turning our faces toward the future God holds for us. You can't get on with a journey if the baggage you're carrying is too heavy. Grief is too heavy. Resentment is too heavy. Grudges and judgments against one another are too heavy. They are starving this congregation when we have been given the sweet invitation by God's angels to take and eat the bread that gives us life.

And what is it we are to take and eat, my friends? For the answer to that we turn to the gospel: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'"

Community. Every time we celebrate Eucharist together, here in this lovely, holy place, we are given sustenance for the journey ahead. Our life together as a eucharistic community is exactly the place where we are healed and restored and forgiven, where we are constituted a new people called to live God's dream, where we gain strength for the journey ahead of us. But too often we don't see this stunning mystery, too often the holiness of bread in your hands, wine in your mouth, brothers and sisters in a sacred circle, the hands of friends and strangers clasp in that moment of silence, too often we

are numb to such emanations of grace.

Annie Dillard says: “Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”

(Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters pp. 40-41.) In the Eucharist and the community that celebrates it, God gives us the power to change the world but like Elijah we are in danger of dying instead in the wilderness of our own recreational resentments.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever...” Take, eat, Good Sheep, lest the journey be too much for you.... God’s life is in us. It’s in our community. It’s in the sacraments we celebrate together and in the holy words of scripture broken open for our understanding. It’s in our music and our prayer, in our silences and our peace sharing. It’s in our caring for one another and for all God’s creation. It’s in our calling to be a holy people.

In Christ God has become one of us, one with us. Therefore we are bread for one another. Let us not be fugitives fleeing from the ways of church too boring to attract. Let us be pilgrims together, on the way to something new. Certainly, the bread of Jesus gives us strength for the journeys in our lives, however difficult or overwhelming they may be. (Sara Koenig in WorkingPreacher.org) Certainly God has given us one another as

companions on that journey, a community where God's presence is **PALPABLE**, where God's mission is engaged, where God's people are forgiven and forgiving. A community where God's people break the bread of life in word and sacrament in order to be strengthened to be his Body in the world. Don't you want to be a part of *that* community?