

Proper 13, Year B, 9 Pentecost  
II Samuel 11:26-12:13a  
Ps 51:1-13  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
John 6:24-35

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## The Bread that Endures

We can know that the five week series of Gospel readings from John were written especially for Good Shepherd because they're about FOOD, a subject close to our hearts. They're about bread in particular.

We at Good Shepherd understand food, for the most part, at least we understand the importance of food for us and for the world.

Nevertheless, there's much we don't always grasp about it, if we ever knew it at all. We don't always realize that everything we eat, *everything*, comes from something that is living or was once living, but that died in order for us to continue to live. All living things live off other living things. We are all about life to life to life.

When I first read that grains and other vegetables actually use sophisticated communication, I didn't like it at all. I didn't like it because in my mind it moved plants into the category of 'beings' rather than 'things.' Not everyone has this amount of St. Francis-ism, but if plants are **beings** I might be more conscious about what I eat and what it means. Plants-as-beings also suggests that I should not waste even vegetable based food.

Veggies are part of God's living and breathing creation. I must say, I'm not quite as sentimental about it when I'm weeding, though.

Grains in a field that have been cut, or that have seen those nearby cut, or attacked by a pest, release volatile chemicals that signal to the remaining grains that they are at risk. Plants also forage for food, wage war, and have some memory. Universities in various parts of the world now have scholars studying plant behavior and plant communication.

For years, botanists have known that plants grow differently, more or less successfully, according to the sounds in their environment. Apparently most plants studied respond positively to smooth jazz and classical music, but not to rock and C&W, and some others. A discussion of musical genre could follow that remark.

This has big implications for us at the Eucharist. This really is the bread that has died for us, physically and spiritually. If we cannot fully understand what happens at communion on a spiritual level; that is, understanding the body of Christ, as agency for us as a church to become the body of Christ, then perhaps we might be helped in

that understanding by realizing that the grains of the baked bread itself feed us in a sacrifice that allows for us to live and become one from the one food.

Feeding others bread unites them and us in a common life, as a cohesive people. Common dining is fundamentally spiritual. The Bread of Life. We love our bread here. Jesus loved eating with people. Food is essential, from physical to spiritual and all of it is about life and death.

In 1942, Abraham Maslow, a humanist psychologist, developed a theory that human beings are motivated to act by needs; needs that are not all equal.

Maslow stacked these needs in layers of necessity, with the most basic ones at the bottom. In the unlikely event that you've never heard Maslow's theory, or have forgotten it, I'll run through it briefly.

1. The needs placed at the bottom, the foundations needs, are the basics: *air, food, water, sleep, bread.*

2. Up one level from those we find the need for safety and security: *shelter, no one stealing your stuff, and income or financial means to live.*

If you're deficient in these 2 lower level needs, you're in some kind of trouble. But two more levels are fundamental well, as follows:

3. Next, we need to give and receive love: *We need close friends and a sense of belonging.*

4. Fourth up the hierarchy, we have a need for self-esteem: *self respect, confidence, and a good reputation among those we respect.*

Those first four needs Maslow called the **Deficit** needs.

His idea was that poverty is a deficiency or frustration in any one of these first 4 areas. He believed that it is difficult to move to the next levels without them.

Above those four essential needs, we find those Maslow called the **Growth** needs.

5. The first of the growth needs is something Maslow called **Self-Actualization**. That is now most often understood now as: *the need to be creative, and the need to develop a moral code regarding truth, justice, wisdom, and meaning.*

And finally, at the very top;

6. **Transcendence**, understood as: *the need for the mystical and spiritual, development of an understanding of a reality greater than ourselves, and a desire to work for the fullness of life.*

At this Transcendence level, people grasp spiritual insights regarding the interconnectedness of creation.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encourages us to grasp this level of mystical understandings about him. In John's Gospel, he states that he has been certified by God to offer something greater and more important than the Deficit needs, something greater than the food that perishes. He doesn't suggest that level one food isn't important; he does feed his followers, and encourages others to feed the hungry, but he says,

“Wait! There’s a greater food comes down from heaven that I can give you. It is nourishment that endures.” He concerns us with what we might call the highest Growth level of Maslow’s needs, transcendent knowledge and experience.

Now I don’t agree completely with all Maslow’s ideas; he was a secular humanist of his time, but his ideas are useful for us this morning.

Maslow describes the bread that decays, the level one bread, and the bread that endures, the level six bread.

Some have had simpler ways of talking about what is needed at the base before higher internalized concepts can be grasped.

The jazz singer Billie Holiday was able to sum up Maslow’s hierarchy in a more concrete manner, saying,

“You’ve got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for any damn body’s sermon on how to behave.”

Mahatma Gandhi said,

“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

But most of us at Good Shepherd are not those people.

At Good Shepherd, most of us can get our hands on a loaf of bread fairly easily. We have the physical aspect of bread covered, our basic food need. And we’re kind of particular about it. Our bread at the altar is usually hand made. We revel at the idea of a pot luck, or really look forward to other food oriented events.

Our body is **filled** with bread at the physical needs level.

But we could be a little short on the bread that comes down from heaven.

Jesus says there is more. We can have the food, the life-giving nourishment that lasts. We can be filled and satisfied in our souls.

Jesus offers **soul food**.

We might ask (or at least I ask), “What do we have to do to have an endless supply of spiritual food?”

That is exactly the question that the followers of Jesus ask in this part of John’s Gospel.

They say, “What do we have to do to perform the works of God?”

Jesus answers, “This is the work you need to do from God: Believe in me.”

The Bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and can give life to Good Shepherd Church. And we could use some fresh, bright, liveliness here.

We need this bread.

I have never fully understood what it means to believe in Jesus, or the Christ.

I can *believe* Jesus easily enough, but believing *IN* Jesus? I’m not so sure about it.

Does it mean believing something *about* him? That’s not what he says.

Does it mean believing what he is reported to have said?

Does it mean we must fuse with Christ?

Does it mean to understanding Christ in us and us in Christ?  
Is it a way of behaving?

**What does it mean to you to believe in Jesus?**

After all, this is the core of our religion.

For me, most of the time it remains a mystery;  
the mystery that the writer of John wants desperately for us to believe,  
that Jesus is the incarnate God who becomes real food for those who hunger.  
That Jesus is the Bread of Life. Yet, it is a mystery.  
Richard Rohr said that we can never grasp a mystery; we can only allow ourselves to  
be grasped by it.

Fortunately, we get some guidance from the Epistle to the Ephesians on how to at  
least **be** the body of Christ, on how to live together in joy in a world falling apart.

Please try not to glaze over because of the run-on sentences in here. Yep, it's an  
epistle, so sometimes for some it's harder to pay attention. But for us at Good  
Shepherd this text offers us something to learn: Here goes:

But speaking the truth in love,  
we must **Grow up** in every way,  
Into the One who is the head,  
**into Christ,**  
From whom the whole body,  
joined and knit together  
by every ligament with which it is equipped,  
as each part is working properly,  
promotes the whole body's growth in building itself up  
in love.

Our little boat at Good Shepherd has traveled through some difficult waters in the  
past few years. Our emotions have been many;  
hurt and resentment,  
guilt and regret,  
anger and self-righteousness  
we've felt burned and burned out.  
Not many of our feelings have been uplifting or life-giving.  
Many of us have felt battered and harmed in our souls.

Truly, truly I say to you, we can no longer afford to carry these feelings or lingering  
hurts with us as a congregation or as individuals, or especially as sub-groups. They  
are poisonous to each of us and to the congregation.  
We could die from our own mourning.  
These dug-in feelings have kept us stuck and thwarted our joy.  
It is not life-giving to use unhappy feelings, as some people call them, as  
"recreational resentments."

Do you know what a recreational resentment is? It is an older bad feeling about someone or something that lives under the surface of a person's skin.

On special occasions, or during hard times, lonely times, or otherwise cranky times, the resentments are taken out and kind of "worked over" again, thus giving them ongoing life.

I do not belittle or minimize what we have felt. I've had strong feelings too, and I've become weary carrying them around. They drain energy. I've needed the bread from heaven for spiritual nourishment.

It is time now to integrate and transform our feelings into life, if we can; into the true Bread of Life that lives at the top of the hierarchy of needs, not at the base;

Into the Bread from Heaven that gives us wisdom, truth, justice and meaning. We're overdue. In addition to forgiving and being forgiven, it might be time to set a gravestone on this period.

You know what sometimes happens in Judaism? The tradition in Judaism is to wait a year after a person's death to set a gravestone. This provides for a defined mourning period, and marks a boundary for turning back to positive, forward-looking life.

An oath of some kind is addressed to the events of the past, and for the fresh look forward.

This far and no more will this period of time subvert our community life.

Of course, we still have feelings about what happened.

At one year a candle is lighted, the gravestone is set, a personal ritual of loss and reintegration takes place, and mourners experience a metanoia, turning from the mourning time to a new direction, toward life; toward solutions and contributions rather than sadness and the despair of loss.

We're hungry here for the bread that endures. We're hungry for vitality. We have trouble having fun partly because of these dieseling feelings.

For the bread of God, the healing Christ, that comes down from heaven and gives life to Good Shepherd and each of us  
is **ready to take hold of us.**

Let's receive this mystery and let it all in!

Let's air out the place and let some new air in!

Let in your God this morning so that we might have peace and joy!

Let's look at each other again as sisters and brothers with Christ and Creation.

And maybe, maybe, even have a little wholehearted fun!

Please forgive me if I have made inaccurate and/or offensive assumptions about you or your actions, thoughts, or feelings.

Ps 51 (portions)

1) Have loving-kindness on me, O God,  
According to your steadfast love;

6) You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7) Purge me and I shall be clean;  
Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow

8) Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed now rejoice.

10) Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.

11) Do not cast me away from your presence  
and do not take your Holy Spirit from me

12) Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.