

Sermon August 2, 2009

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Good morning—it's good to see so many of you here this morning that were with us for the wonderful celebration of St. James' Day at Mame Albrecht home last Sunday, a service under a tent, baptism of twins in the swimming pool, and a buffet lunch that was more than enough to feed the hungry horde of some 150 gathered there for that special event. We heard the first of three Sunday gospels centering around Jesus' special miracle of feeding, special because it is the only miracle story told in all four gospels, special because it is the only one that includes the little boy who offers his lunch so that all may be fed, and special because it features a central message in the gospels of God's great generosity. We couldn't have asked for a more satisfying message on that special day.

But wait! Is that the whole story? It's good that we're coming back to that Gospel again this morning, and next Sunday, because, if you think about it, it may have raised many, many questions. In the three year cycle of Gospel passages I preached on this Gospel from the sixth chapter of John three years ago. The illustrations I used then were about the wonderful abundance that people were enjoying, way back in 2006, when there seemed to be growth and prosperity on every front, and if you couldn't keep up with the race for More of everything—you simply got refinanced! But now, only three years later, stories of rising riches in every direction seem like ancient history.

Now in the midst of the financial turbulence, or the "recent unpleasantness" that has impacted all of us, I'm reminded of a scene from Tom Hanks' movie a few years ago, "Forrest Gump" When Forrest Gump began to run and run, people began to follow Forrest. Well, soon Forrest stopped and said it was time to go home. But I will never forget what one of the people in the crowd said. The people were asking when Forrest walked away, "What will we do?" "What will we do?"

"What will we do?" I've been thinking for some time that one of the things that this financial turbulence has caused us to do is to reassess what gives permanent value in our lives. We have taken so much for granted. Like the people following Forrest just because he was running, we got caught up in the whirl and just thought that everything would keep going forward. Since we emerged from World War II there has been a rising tide of economic expectations. Some people here will remember Ronald Reagan as a pitchman for General Electric and their mantra, "Progress is our most important

product.” Those were times of John Kenneth Galbraith’s “Age of Affluence” and books like “Surfeit of Riches.”

But at least for the time being it looks as if the music has stopped, and we ask, “What will we do?” Most everyone I know is assessing what matters to them the most, what is really basic in our lives.

Of course it’s not just food that we clamor for. The crowds then are not much different than the crowds now—all wanting more, still thirsty, still hungry. It was St. Augustine who said that our souls are restless until they find their rest in God. We are a hungry and thirsty people. We hunger to be seen, to be known, to matter to have meaning and purpose. Sometimes we don’t realize that this is what we need the most.

John’s Gospel tells us that the crowd came looking for Jesus again. They had had their fill of the barley loaves, but now they are hungry again. But are you surprised that Jesus won’t just let them take him for granted? He knows why they had come looking for him in the first place. In verse 26 he says, “Very truly I tell you, you are coming for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

St. Paul would say of such people that, “ God is their belly” They believe that life is all about getting their needs met, having pleasure, having money for nice things, living in big houses. But now I think we’ve learned that this kind of bread has a limited shelf life. What Jesus offers is a bread that fills a deeper hunger—a hunger for purpose, a hunger for meaning, a hunger for life in the fullest sense, not just a full belly. That’s the key to the food that will fill those all of our hungers.

Thinking about the Wheaties cereal box on the breakfast table, The bread Jesus is talking about is indeed the breakfast of champions! We’ll be hearing more about that next Sunday as we re-visit this sixth chapter of St. John’s gospel. What we’re talking about is the bread that lasts long after a Sunday morning service is over, long after the coffee hour is over. Down through the ages
Jesus’ promise never gets stale: “I AM the bread of life.”

So Last Sunday, in referring to the baptism of the twins in the swimming pool, I said that more is begun in the service of baptism than is ended. More is begun in a marriage ceremony than is ended as Jesus promises to give the bread of his presence. But it’s not just at these special marking points in our life that we need to feed a quality of life worth eternalizing. Indeed we all need it now.

In a time when so many of our goals and expectations have been shaken up, we need his presence in our prayers as we sort out what really matters the most in the way we

spend our time, our gifts, and our money. Like the manna that came down from on high to sustain the people of God on their journey to the promised land we need the breakfast of champions that must be “fresh every morning.” In times like these, we need most of all to pay attention when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

That’s where the Gospel ends today, and that’s where it begins next Sunday. I hope you’ll be thinking about that, and doing something about it, before we gather again.
AMEN