

Sermon August 9, 2009

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

There is an old story about the farmer and his mule. In order to save money he tried to mixing in sawdust with the mule's food. One fourth seemed to work. Then he tried half. That seemed to work, so then he tried three-quarters of sawdust, and it didn't seem to affect the mule. So the farmer went to all sawdust. Two days later the mule died. The farmer was heard to comment, "the mule ate himself to death."

In times like these we must be cautious about what is filling our lives. At first it may not seem to matter, but what we are filling our lives with, sooner or later defines who we are.

Today's Gospel opens with the disciples looking for Jesus—which is just what we're doing here in this sermon, looking for Jesus. And that may be difficult, because we are people who have limited vision, and because any effort to "define" God even by trying to do this in our understanding of Jesus inevitably runs out in mystery.

Toward the end of the first century after Jesus' death old St. John reflected on all that was known about Jesus' in the life of the emerging Church and through the accounts of Jesus' from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and he realized that the whole story could never be told just by a chronological account of his life or by a string of definitions. Any effort to do that inevitably resulted in trying to know a God through Jesus that was simply too small and thus not even relevant to our lives. The only way to open up how Jesus meets us at and in the deepest points of our lives and the world's need is to challenge our poetic sensibilities and prepare to be led into a world made strange by the appearance of Jesus as the Word of God made flesh.

So the author of this Gospel decided that another history doesn't need to be written, That wouldn't fill the God-shaped hole in our lives. So he breaks into poetry to bear the weight and the depth of what he wants to say. So we hear Jesus described in metaphors like "I am bread" and "I am the Vine", "I am the door" "I am the Light of the World" to shed light on the meaning of Jesus and expand our understanding of who He is for us. You remember that the Lord God in the old or Hebrew Testament is known simply as "I am" For five consecutive Sundays we hear Jesus revealed to us in the poetic metaphor "I am the Bread of Life."

But I have to confess that I am not as much an artist or poet as I need to be in understanding through metaphors all there is to understand about Jesus. Many of you may feel the same way. When I was in the 7th grade I was placed in an experimental social studies class where we did such innovative things as go to a cemetery and spend time there writing poetry. "Progressive Education" in Springfield Missouri received nation-wide attention through such experiments but I have to confess I didn't learn much

personally. My brain responds better to a Walter Cronkite ending his broadcasts for 21 years by saying with reassuring certainty, "and that's the way it is."

I have a hunch there may be many of you who are of the same temperament. and to read that Jesus is the "bread of life" may sound somehow distant from reality, and so your mind begins to wander as you read one of the five Gospels this summer about Jesus as "bread" for my life and for the world, or hear a sermon based on those texts.

Maybe it's bad form to praise vandalism in a sermon, but graffiti can sometimes point to spiritual truth. I have in mind a billboard paid for by a church in a small town which said, "Jesus is the answer." In spray paint, one night, somebody added, "And what was the question?" That spiritual truth, expressed in a slightly illegal way, points to the fact that in life it matters which questions get asked.

Now it may be that you have come here as a visitor or newcomer to a church that has grown quite a bit in lately, not because of its rush to answers from an old book but because of its willingness to engage the questions that life presents in a rapidly changing culture, and consider them as they sit illuminated from the three-legged stool of scripture as a living document, tradition, and reason.

It could well be that you have come here with a young family. That's a good percentage of newcomers among us. We rejoice that we have a well-run Sunday School where children hear the good news of God's love and God's grace. But since they are in this church environment only a few minutes on Sundays, it's all the more important that the adults of all ages are here to share in living into and willing to talk about the big questions that come to every family and individual's life: "What are you seeking? What's worth working for? What are you hungry for?" I think it's fair to say that we are all looking for healing, peace, meaning, joy, forgiveness, community.

So consider what nourishes you in your life. Consider the possibility that there is answer to that question to be discovered in Jesus who is revealed in John's gospel as "the bread of life." What would life be like if we could embrace the answer that Jesus feeds us, that the God-shaped space in each of us is satisfied by the presence of Jesus.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of manna from heaven again and again, as a reminder of God's love, of God's grace. Now The Messiah, so long expected, would be the one who would bring that grace. So the Gospel of John speaks of bread giving that life, and Jesus is that bread. The author of this Gospel writes not so much to tell of miracles for their own sake, but as a sign to hungry seekers that as we offer what we have to God, and receive that bread we will find in that offering a way to move forward with some peace and fulfillment in our hearts.

So then act on the answers you find.