

“The Bread of His Presence.”

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I happened to be driving to Tysons Corner in Virginia this past week, and one of those church sign messages in front of a Methodist Church caught my attention. The message is about the next Sunday and the message is “Hot Dogs and Worship 6:45 pm” Don't laugh-- It may well be that the sermon will be about food, because the Methodists use the same lectionary that we do, and the Gospels have been about food for several weeks.

So now, my friends, we come to the last of five sermons all revolving around the 71 verses of Chapter six of John's Gospel that began at a picnic on St. James' Day and continued through these Sundays of August. These are the lazy, hazy days in Washington when Congress takes a recess. There may be some of you who took a recess from church, and so I'll give you a few clues to what you may have missed.

Four weeks ago, appropriately at a picnic, was the feeding of the five thousand and the role that a small boy had, offering his little lunch, able to let go and offer what he had, to become a partner in God's generosity. The importance of an unimportant little boy—the power of one to make a difference. It all came together that Sunday, because twin boys were baptized that morning, and I stressed how more is begun at baptism than is ended—the power of that sacrament has to be renewed every day, just as manna from heaven and fresh bread have to be discovered in new ways every day.

Jesus, no matter how poetic his words in this chapter sound, was a realist. He knew that all too many in the crowds that came to Jesus were just there for the food—as I imagine that some will be at that church service in Virginia for the hot dogs, as some were who were with us on St. James' Day for the picnic. So Jesus knew it was important to describe how his presence among them was the food that was beyond just the temporary satisfactions of the day.

Then the next Sunday in this series we thought together about the financial turbulence of the times we're living in, and how-- because we can't afford as much in discretionary choices for food and fun--, that this may be a teachable time, an opportunity, to find, all

over again how Jesus himself is the food that never is exhausted. What is it, deep down, that we hunger for? What Jesus offers is a bread that fills a deeper hunger than for big houses and big cars and Julia Child cuisine—a hunger for purpose, a hunger for meaning, a hunger for life and love, connection and caring.

What Jesus offers to fill this god-shaped hole in our lives is himself. As old St. John in this last of the four Gospels pictures it, Jesus himself is a pointer, a sign to the answer of our human need and questions. “I am the door” “I am the vine” --Jesus, in John’s metaphoric language, has described himself. Now in perhaps the most profound way possible, Jesus asks us to eat his flesh and drink his blood—that is, to take him in, and digest him and his words, to understand him so profoundly that we become like him, identify with him and his view of the world.

When we hear and read that, there will be people who will do what I’ve described before as a way to deal with some of what we read in the bible: we pull down the shades of our mind, or perhaps at least murmur as the disciples did, “Hmm, this is a hard saying, difficult to take.” This is too much for those whose faith is glued just to tradition in their religious practices and understanding.

Jesus knows what they’re thinking. “Does this offend you?” he asks them. This is one of those testing times like Joshua in the first reading saying to the Israelites on their long pilgrimage into the promised land, “Choose today whom you will serve.” Those of Jesus’ followers who were attracted to him because of his popularity and his healing miracles find these sayings hard to take, and many left him.

Actually I don’t think some leave for reasons that profound. Some people are about church as my brother Hal was when he broke his arm, falling out of bed. We asked him, “how in the world could you fall out of bed?”. “Well,” he said, “I guess I didn’t get very far in it.” The records of churches are full of the names of people who were baptized and never heard from again. More is begun at baptism than is ended. People sometimes start going to church when their children are old enough for Sunday School, and then drift away when the children are grown. When I graduated from high school I thought I had graduated from church and only went on Christmas and Easter when I was in college to keep my mother happy.

I also remember that when I was in my first church we had a babysitter who was always available on Sunday. She didn’t go to church. When the North Methodist and South Methodists were re-united some 80 years after the Civil War, they decided to worship together in another building rather than the one Mrs. Cleveland had attended—so she never went to church again. We all know of other examples like that—or of a staff member of a nursing home was checking one Sunday afternoon who would be coming

to the evening worship service that day. One lady gave an honest answer, “I don’t know, it depends on who’s pitching and who’s praying.”

Those are all familiar examples of superficial reasons people drift away from church. In an earlier sermon in this series I mentioned the church who put up a billboard with the statement “Jesus is the answer.” And alongside someone had used a graffiti brush to write “And what was the question.” There are tougher choice and faith questions than that lady’s reply. It was more difficult than that for many of his disciples who heard Jesus say that in his very flesh and blood the bread that comes from heaven is present in their midst. Will they accept that or reject it? Jesus says that the key to all the peace and joy of his promises is to ABIDE in him—stay connected to him, for only through his living presence will there be the food that will last forever, food that brings forgiveness, acceptance, meaning and life.

But is this enough? I’ve mentioned for the last two Sundays people coming to the great dancer Pavlova and asking her to explain her dance. And her answer was, “If I could explain it, I wouldn’t need to dance it.” Jesus doesn’t offer explanations for his real presence to his disciples then or to us. He offers himself.

Jesus asks Peter if he has asked too much of him, to accept that Jesus himself was God made flesh in their midst—the premise that is the basis of all of the Gospel of John --The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Peter does not try to explain his answer. His response is one that will be challenged many times, as we know, but it is one that now has lasted through the centuries, “Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

My friends, in the lazy and hazy August days we know that after Labor Day comes the back-to-school spirit that makes it feel like a new year. But that’s not all that there can be. No matter what state our faith or our world is in, what beckons us to gather in this place is the promise with the bread of his presence the possibility of the “more” in life that we are all hungry for—if we will stay with him, if we will abide in him.

He offers bread for a life worth eternalizing. Will we take that bread?

AMEN.