

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13
Psalm 51:1-13
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

Proper 13B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Life-Giving Bread

Last Sunday, when Colin greeted me after church, he said something about wondering why King David was so highly regarded when he was such a bad behavior. He wondered what I would do with that story. Well, we talked a bit about that, about how people are messy, how the story isn't over until it's over, how God will use anyone who will allow it, to do God's good work in the world. I also allowed that it was somewhat irresponsible of me to allow the story of David having Bathsheba's husband killed so he wouldn't be busted for impregnating her, to go unaddressed.

I hope you've been following the story of the prophet Samuel's call, of his place in the life of King David, and of David, the king Jesus' followers wanted him to emulate. David's story is amazing and the passages we've heard these last few weeks are all really worth talking about. But because we're Episcopalians rather than Baptists or Presbyterians, I'm pretty sure I can't stand up here and preach for 45 minutes. So I have the hard job of choosing. And even though we're in the really dicey part of the King David story, even though we're in the gorgeous letter to the Ephesians hearing about what the church really can be, we are also in the midst of five weeks of John's mysterious and wonderful bread of life discourse, and I am called to the gospel once more. I know you have bibles, or phones you can read the Bible on, so read the stories on your own, and then come and preach them to me.

It is said that some people eat to live and that some live to eat. I am in the second group. Throughout all time, people from every corner of the planet have fed one another, because they love one another. Food is the language of love... we learned that from Jesus over and over again, but especially in one particular conversation with Peter. Three times Jesus asked, "Peter do you love me?" and each time Peter responded "You know I love you, Lord," Jesus said the same thing. Do you remember? He said "Feed my sheep." If you love ME, feed the people. Love is poured out, taken in and exceedingly multiplied, in the act of feeding people. I think that's why there are all those stories of Jesus feeding people: with fish, with bread, and now finally, with himself, the bread of life. Food is the language of love.

When we first started hearing bread and the bread of life last week, it was the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. Thousands of people had come to listen to him preach peace and love and justice and mercy as the way of the kingdom of God. When Jesus saw all those people, he didn't rush to prepare his notes or even pray for a clear mind and the right words to say. His first concern was food: "Where are we to find bread for all of these people?" You know how the story goes - all were fed, had all that they wanted and there were baskets full left over. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes was a miracle, yes. But the miracle of all that bread really

points to the miracle of Jesus himself - the bread that came down from heaven, the bread we are offered always, the bread that is the bread of life.

When Jesus says, *"For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,"* what he is telling us is that he himself is the food that is truly life-giving. Yes, he can provide the crusty bread that will feed the masses, and of course he did that and commanded us to do the same. But Jesus feeds us his very self in the bread and in the wine of Eucharist. This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you. Life in God isn't just in eternity, but also right here, this very morning, in the consecrated bread I will place in your outstretched hands. As Episcopalians, we believe that Jesus is really, truly present in the bread and in the wine. That is different from the bread turning into Jesus' body or the wine turning into Jesus' blood. We believe that Jesus is truly present in the holy bread, in the holy wine, AND in the holy people of God. The gifts of God for the people of God – holy things for holy people. You see, you too are consecrated, made holy, set apart for God.

Parents sometimes tell me their children should not receive communion because they are too young to understand it. My response is always the same – "I don't understand it, either." We can't possibly understand exactly what is happening in the sacraments, how could we? They are signs that point to God, and that steep us ever more deeply in God. Sacraments are to be experienced rather than understood. In the Eucharist, when we take in the bread that is the bread of life, when we take Jesus into our bodies, we will, if we are mindful, if we are prayerful, if we are present, we will experience God. And that, my dears, will change us. In the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist we actively take in God's grace. And because we do, we are changed.

Some of you know the definition of a sacrament. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace. Which means they do what they are. I'll explain that. When I first came to St Barnabas I would stand at the door after church and watch you to see what you wanted to do. Some of you nodded your heads, some of you reached out your hand to shake mine, and a very few of you tentatively opened your arms inviting a hug. Having identified me as a "hugger" early on, many of you now open your arms at the door each Sunday. Those handshakes and hugs show the love in our relationships, but they also do what they are - they deepen our relationships. They are outward signs of our love, and they also serve to deepen our love. They change us. And that changes the world.

That's how the sacraments work. They show us God's love for us, and they pour God's love into us, making us more loving. They are experiential, engaging all our senses. We see the priest calling down the Holy Spirit, we hear the words that have been said over and over again for thousands of years, we smell the holy oil, we taste the bread and the wine, and I touch someone, or something, in every single sacrament. In all those acts, God is doing something extraordinary

with ordinary things – bread, wine, water, oil, human touch. God makes everything holy, and in recognizing that, we are changed. We would be wise to think twice about coming forward for communion if we don't want to be changed. You see, sacraments don't just point to the God who transforms us, sacraments actually do transform us. It isn't easy to understand, but then sacraments aren't really meant to be understood. They are meant to be experienced. The bread we will eat and the wine we will drink at communion this morning, are outward and visible signs of God's grace... but when we eat the bread and drink the wine, God creates more love in us and among us, deepening our relationship with God and with the whole communion of saints. The sacraments are meant to change us. And they do.

When the people asked Jesus to give them the bread that comes down from heaven, the bread that gives life to the world, they thought it was because they needed to fill their bellies. But it wasn't. Somewhere inside themselves they must have begun to understand who Jesus really was, and they wanted to take him in, to have him with them always. When Jesus talked about himself as the true bread, the bread of life, I think it was because that was the best way for the incarnate Jesus to convey to the incarnate ones around him, the intimacy he sought with them, the intimacy he seeks with each of us. I can think of nothing stronger, nothing bolder, nothing closer, nothing more intimate than eating and drinking in God, because as incarnate beings, eating and drinking is how we get things into our fleshy bodies. Jesus wants us to take him in, to feed on him, to sustain ourselves with the living Word that was made flesh and dwells among us. Jesus gives us his entire being in the Eucharist. His humanity mingles with our humanity, and his divinity becomes our divinity. His flesh and blood, his very life force becomes our own in the Eucharist. In a bit of bread and a sip of wine, we too are made holy.

Jesus used 5 loaves and 2 fish to bless all those people on the mountain top because God will use anything, especially the most ordinary things in life, to bless us. God comes to us in the ordinary stuff of life. Not –for most of us at least- in extraordinary visions or spontaneous miracles... but in a bit of bread and a sip of wine. In the face of a child. In a tomato picked fresh from the garden. In glorious music or the scent of a newly opened lily. We are not transformed because we eat bread, sip wine, pick tomatoes, listen to music or smell flowers. We are transformed because God has transformed all those things and made them holy, so when we take them in, we are made holy too. When we come for communion with empty, outstretched hands, we come not just to remember Jesus death and resurrection, and not simply to share a common meal of fellowship. We come to be fed by Jesus, and to feed on him - to take him into ourselves, and to be changed.

What would change in you if you truly believed that you were taking Jesus in to your very being when you eat the bread and drink the wine. That's what you're doing you know... and the inward and spiritual grace of this sacrament is Jesus alive and living and loving in you. Amen.