

Bread for the Life of the World

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

10th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 14, Year B. August 13, 2006. (Text: John 6:37-51)

I love bread! I mean the hearty, heavy, whole grain, crunchy stuff, the sort where a loaf weighs about a pound and a half. I love it for breakfast, with butter and marmalade. I rate our Aspen restaurants by the quality of the bread they put out for guests when they're first seated. The ones that bring out a nice basket of luscious *warm* ciabatta rolls and sliced focaccia or wheat bread folded in a white linen napkin are the winners. (*Mmm! mmm!*) By the time my main course arrives I've usually eaten so much bread and butter that I don't have much of an appetite.

Back around '99 – having reached the age that my waistline was advancing and my hairline was retreating, I decided to do something about the waistline and go on the Atkins Diet. I'm sure some of you tried that. (It was the low carbohydrate thing, remember?) It worked, but one of the things I had to give up was bread. On the diet I could only eat some awful stuff that was mostly cellulose and tasted like pine bark. I lost about 15 pounds, but eventually had to give up the diet. All the pork chops and cream cheese I could have were no substitute for bread. —*I need bread!*

We heard a familiar passage this morning from John's gospel. To understand John, we need to be aware that in nearly every situation, he's offering answers to the questions, "Who is Jesus? ...Who is this man? ...What is he all about?" —In John, Jesus answers these questions with repeated "I" statements. He says, for example, "*I am the light of the world.*" "*I am the good shepherd.*" "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*"

Today Jesus tells the crowd (some of the 5,000 people he has just fed with five loaves and two little fish), "*I am the bread that came down from heaven.*" He says again, "*I am the bread of life.*" And he adds, "*Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*"

Here we see that Jesus connects himself both with God and with the people who are listening to him. He says, in effect, "*I'm here for you. I've come from God to be 'bread' for you. ...to give myself for you.*" — In a sense, this identification with bread is very humble, isn't it?— He says that his work in the world is to be "bread" – the most ordinary, basic, simple food. Nothing special. He doesn't say, "*I am caviar,*" or "*I am filet mignon*" (or whatever first century Galilean gourmet delicacies would have been). And he doesn't say, "*I am the spice of life.*" He says, "*I am bread.*" ...Just bread.

But bread was THE necessity. It was the staple of everyone's diet. In Jesus' native tongue, the invitation to come and share a meal – even a very elegant banquet in a palace – was "Come and *eat bread* with us." So Jesus was saying "*I am the basic necessity of life.*" And that's what Christians proclaim to the world. We say "Jesus is the basic necessity for Life. If you want to live, really *live* with gusto... (which, in a sense, is what it means to have 'eternal life') you need Jesus!" —Clearly, not everyone would agree with that proposition. Jesus acknowledged that not everybody was going to accept him; not everybody would come to him. Lots of people around him said, "Who needs this Jesus? ...this carpenter turned preacher?" That's why Jesus says, in today's gospel, "*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.*"

I want you to notice something important about bread: it's a means to an end. Food is eaten *in order to give life*.

Anorexia is a terrible disease. I imagine most of us know people who have suffered from it. I hear that it's rooted somehow in the person's self-image; anorexics have a fractured, false picture of the self. Years ago I had a woman in my parish who suffered from this condition. Where do you think I ran into her most often, other than in church? —At the supermarket! I remember encountering her once when I was doing the grocery shopping, pushing around a cart piled high with all kinds of goodies. (I love to eat, and I love shopping for food. What I forget to buy at the store is not food, but stuff like Kleenex and light bulbs.) This woman was at the fresh fruit and vegetable section, and her cart had just a few things in it —paper products and cleaning supplies, of course, no food. After we'd exchanged greetings, she said to me, "Look at this Olathe sweet corn, isn't it gorgeous? And those cantaloupes... they are *so* perfect!" I said to her, "They

look delicious. Why don't you get some? Can't you just taste them right now?" —She, like all anorexics, thought constantly about food. But she would not eat... or *could* not allow herself to eat, at least not enough to stay healthy.

Jesus said, "*The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*"

You've heard the old saying, "You are what you eat." We can't take that literally, of course, but in a profound sense it's absolutely true. We who feed upon Christ *become* the Body of Christ. We become, graphically, the "flesh" of Christ. And so, like Christ, *we* Christians are meant to become "bread" given by God for the life of the world. —How do we turn that idea into more than just another piece of religious rhetoric? I want to suggest four ways.

The first way: Stay humble. Stay basic... like bread. See your life in the world as meant for something beyond your own personal gratification. If you are to be "one who gives life to the world," that idea can charge your mind and soul with vision and purpose. God has a work for *you* to do, but it's probably not going to earn you a lot of public recognition. So stay humble.

The second way: Let your conversations be life-giving. Does what you say to other people build them up? Does talking to you give other people joy and hope and courage and the ability to go on with their lives, especially if they've had hard times? Moses said that people "*live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" What word does God want *you* to speak on his behalf to your neighbor? ...your spouse? ...your child? ...or the stranger you meet at coffee hour when this service is over? What are these people hungry to hear? Perhaps they're starving to hear "*I'm glad to get to talk to you.*" Or "*I admire you.*" Or, maybe, "*What can I do to help you?*" Or just, "*Have I told you lately that I love you? Well, I do!*"

The third way: Engage in life-giving behavior. If we're to be "bread for the life of the world," we have to think seriously about the world and what it needs. And I'm talking about the *kosmos*, the physical world, as well as the people in it. (*Kosmos* is the Greek word that's used for "the world" here in John's gospel.) So, one part of what I'm talking about is compassion for the environment —making decisions and engaging in behaviors that nurture the earth. (I believe that mission is alive and well here in our town.) —And the other part of what I'm talking about is compassion for the more than 2.5 billion people who go to sleep hungry every night. I know it's hard to think about hungry people when we're surrounded here by world-class restaurants, but we have to *act* to give life to the physically hungry people of the world, and not just talk about how sad it is.

This leads me to the fourth and last way I want to mention that we can become "bread for the life of the world," and that is: You can implement your faith. Jesus said, "*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.*" You might be the agent God has chosen to "draw" someone to Jesus! And the most effective means of drawing others to the Bread of Life is *your* life and what your life stands for.

Don't forget the famous instruction of St. Francis of Assisi to his friars. He sent them out, saying: "Go into the world and preach the Good News. If necessary, use words." Your *life* can be bread to feed a hungry heart.

Today we've come to where we might feed on Word and Sacrament. But there's nothing magic here. Sharing the Eucharist doesn't automatically lead to moral transformation. It's possible to hear the Gospel, yet not *listen* to it. It's possible to swallow the Sacrament, yet not be *nourished* by it.

Many of us suffer from a kind of spiritual anorexia. Like the woman I mentioned who spent so much time in the supermarket, some people come to church because they "admire" the gospel of Christ. After church, they say to the preacher, "What a wonderful message." —*But they don't take anything in!* They come and look, but never *taste*... never savor the goodness of the Lord... never *feed on* the Bread of Life in such a way that they *become what they have eaten*.

Today I invite you: Come and eat! "*Taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy are those who put their trust in him.*"