

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2021: "food that endures for eternal life"

Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

That one never grows old, does it? Judy Garland's famous utterance when the fact that she has wound up someplace completely and utterly different from where she expected to be is one for the ages. And ever since the Wizard of Oz graced the silver screen the better part of a century ago that line has been spoken on occasions when people find themselves in a space-physical, psychological, or spiritual, that is very different from where they expected to be.

I think it might be a fitting line for today's Gospel portion.

It's important to read this passage, the opening lines of what scholars call the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John, in context. Last week we read the story that immediately precedes it.

Jesus, with the help of a little boy who supplies five barley loaves and two fish, feeds five thousand people in the wilderness. It's a miracle to be sure, and a very earthy one. In it, God partners with creation to satisfy one of creation's most basic and fundamental needs, the need for material food, in an extraordinary way. It points very much to how Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, is like us, or more to the point how we are like him in his divinized humanity.

Lest we think this is all there is to our faith, though, today he takes things in a completely different direction.

*Do not work for the food that perishes, he tells us, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*

And when questioned about this mysterious food that endures for eternal life, he elaborates by saying, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

The continuity with last week's story is pretty obvious. We're still talking about food. But that's where the continuity ends. We're no longer talking about food in the normal sense of the word, the kind that, when we eat it, gives our bodies a temporary nutritional bump and sustains them until the next time we eat.

No, here we're talking about a type of sustenance that, once received, keeps the soul alive and well forever, well beyond the bounds of this mortal life.

And here we reach the great paradox of our faith. Which is Jesus—a divinized human just like us, or a humanized deity utterly above and beyond us? The answer is both.

Last week we got more of the first side of this paradox. And the calling in that is what we already explored—to realize that we are not just God's creatures but an active part of God's creativity. We are partners with the divine in creating and even in making miracles, and we are called to offer up whatever gifts God has given us for that purpose.

But this week we see the humanized deity, the one who, no matter how high we climb, will always be infinitely higher. And this humanized deity calls us to do something very simple, but something that is, given our human tendencies, perhaps even more difficult than partnering with God in making miracles. He calls us to receive, simply to receive.

He doesn't just say that he *has* food for us, he says that he *is* food for us. And all we need to do with that food, all we even can do with that food, is receive it and take it. It is something so far beyond our ability to make or to control that we dare not do anything but receive it gratefully from the hand that offers it.

The most obvious form this food takes is of course the Eucharist. Yes, the Eucharist does of course involve some material elements of bread and wine that we had some role in producing or at least procuring. But those material elements are simply the physical representation of us consuming something that we have no power to create, something that is given to us as pure gift. They are the physical representation of us eating the very substance of God. And unless the Holy Spirit comes to the table with us, as we trust that she does when in our hearts we invite her, the bread and wine are simply food that perishes. But when she does, we are then consuming the food that endures for eternal life.

So just as the encouragement from last week's Gospel was to give of yourself in order to be a co-creator with God, the encouragement in this week's is simply to receive. Receive that

which we cannot make for ourselves, which we cannot earn, and which we cannot even begin to fathom. Receive it as pure gift from a giver whose grace is beyond measure.

And please know that while the formal Eucharist may be the most obvious time and place for this receiving, it is hardly the only one. This food that endures for eternal life isn't contained within four walls, nor is it contained in a particular point in time. Jesus didn't say, "whoever comes to church on Sunday will never be hungry, and whoever nibbles and sips at the altar rail will never be thirsty." He said, "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

It's the action verbs that count here: come, and believe. The Spirit of Jesus is beckoning all of us somewhere; of that much I am completely confident. Where is it for you? Once you have begun to discern that, go where he beckons. And as you go, believe. Believe that, no matter what is happening around you, you are going exactly where you belong. This is how we receive the food that endures for eternal life.

Now you might ask how we know we have received this food? There's not too much I can say about that in a sermon. This is not something that human tools are capable of measuring or that words are capable of expressing. But I will say this much: you will know. Just pay close attention.

You know that sensation you get when you're really hungry and you finally get to sit down to a good meal? Isn't there a deep satisfaction in your belly that tells you an important need was just met?

How much more so do we feel a deep satisfaction in our souls when their need for eternal sustenance is met. Watch for that satisfaction. That existential restlessness we so often feel subsides and we know, at least for a split second, that where we are, and more importantly *how* we are, is exactly right. That is how we know we have received the food that endures for eternal life.

And let me make sure I conclude with perhaps the most important point of all. You may be hearing all this and wondering if you have ever experienced the sort of soul satisfaction I'm talking about. Or perhaps you have, but it feels like eons ago. Let me assure you that that if you desire and seek the food that endures for eternal life, someday, somehow you will find it. The one who gives it isn't stingy. He wants you to find it. He wants to give it to you. He will not let you go hungry forever. Keep seeking, and you will find.