

THE LIVING BREAD OF COMMUNITY

8/12/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 14 (B): 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

If you've been following our lectionary readings, you'll have noticed that these late summer Gospel readings are FULL of "bread of life" passages. It's almost like the recording got stuck while the folks who created the lectionary went on their summer vacation: "I am the bread of life, I am the true bread, I am the living bread...I AM the bread of life."

Then again, when I think of it in terms of a play on words that we're toying with in relation to our mission statement (which you can recite or read from the front cover of your bulletin: "we reveal God's love by nourishing the community through acceptance, worship, and service."), it makes more sense.

Adding the words: "because hunger comes in many forms..." which would make it: "because hunger comes in many forms, we reveal God's love by nourishing the community through acceptance, worship, and service." When I think of it that way, maybe that's what Jesus is saying, "hunger comes in many forms, so let me tell you all the ways I can be for you the bread of life."

Today's particular passage lifts up that Jesus is the LIVING bread. To me, that is significant. "I am the bread of life," is much more of a solid statement, there's not much fluidity in that. It's a little bit like the "Flat Jesus" circulating around the country. Have you seen this?

Children color "Flat Jesus", then the image is usually laminated, and then they are encouraged to take "Flat Jesus" with them in their daily activities (I've left some copies over on the children's table in the side chapel area over there). Of course, it involves taking photos and posting them on social media. It's a great idea, and helps kids (or adults) keep Jesus at the forefront of their minds.

But it is a "Flat Jesus". One dimensional, no movement, no change. That Jesus is simply what is. And, for many forms of our hunger, we need exactly that kind of nourishment—something that is secure and unwavering...the consistent knowledge that God is our source and center.

At the same time, there are many other forms of hunger that require the dynamic, relationality of the "living bread". Living indicates a continual process of evolving and adapting; this nourishment is fluid and filled with vitality. So it's also significant that this idea of "living bread" is paired with this morning's passage from Ephesians describing how to live in community, because, certainly, it is in community where things are ever dynamic and continually evolving.

So Ephesians instructs: "let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors...be angry but do not sin; Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Further instructions include: "put away your bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice." Instead, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving."

Just as hunger comes in many forms, that sense of community comes in many forms as well. Last week as our youth shared, one of them—I think it was Matthew—described his sense of the strange juxtaposition of going to help an area of devastation and great need, and, yet,

finding that that area was in the middle of a neighborhood much like the ones most of us live in.

He explained that the experience helped him realize that you never know by looking at people's clothing, cars, or other trappings, exactly the kind of help they might actually need. And, almost all of the kids, who spoke, talked about how inspiring it was to see this Sonoma County community helping and supporting each other ever since the fires they suffered last summer.

So one type of nourishment Jesus offers is the "living bread" through us being the hands and feet of God in the world. I heard a remarkable way that this recently happened in the animal kingdom. Maybe you heard the story. It's heart-breaking, actually, but also very thought-provoking.

A few weeks ago one of the members of a pod of orcas in the Salish Sea near Seattle, gave birth. But within less than 30 minutes, the calf died. Scientists and animal sociologists noted that it's not unheard of that large mammals will carry their dead offspring for several hours—maybe even a day—but this case was very unusual, because 11 days later this female orca was still refusing to let her dead baby sink to the bottom of the ocean.

There's some speculation that because she did have half an hour of swimming with her baby beside her, that this mother may have held on to her calf longer, because the bonding had been greater than if it had been still-born. So that's fascinating in and of itself, but even more fascinating is how the entire pod supported the mother in her grief.

The observers and reporters aren't sure, but it appeared that other orcas in the pod took turns floating the calf's body back up to the surface, and carrying her on their backs. What the onlookers were very clear about was that this community of orcas had stopped their normal activities to be with the grieving mother. For instance, they created a safety zone around her so boats and other vessels couldn't come too close.

What's also heart-breaking is that the mother seemed to be putting her own health at risk while she grieved expending much of her energy in her attempt to keep the calf afloat. But the pod supported her anyway. What an amazing teaching to the world observing. Sometimes, there is nothing we can really do to help someone in our midst, other than gather in community, and just be with that person, while they do whatever they need to do—even if it's something we wouldn't recommend doing.

Not judging them, simply being with them; crying for as long as they need to, not crying if that's not what works for them; holding them if that's what they want, giving them space if that's the kind of person they are; letting them talk non-stop, or sitting in silence with them. Just being with them.

A few weeks ago after we had shared the letter from Tyler, the young man responsible for the fires on our campus, I learned about another tool for being the "living bread" in community, and that's a process called Restorative Justice. It's not necessarily something that would be applicable for three counts of arson, but the parishioner who told me about it shared with me how the method is used on college campuses and in other community settings.

From what I understand, instead of the victim reporting their grievance against somebody to an authority, and then that authority punishing the offender for their rule-breaking conduct, the victim, other people who experienced the situation, and the offender are all invited into a

talking circle. Within the circle, each person has the opportunity to share what was true for them in the experience. This means the offender hears the ways their actions affected the victim, and how that might have rippled out into other parts of their life. Similarly, the victim hears the extenuating circumstances that caused the offender to take such action, and what they would do differently if they had to do over again.

Then, instead of punishment, they all work out a way of moving forward—usually involving some plan for restitution—and with a sense of the community being restored. Which is a little like the passage from Ephesians which says: “thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.” Isn’t that wild and wonderful all at the same time?

It doesn’t say that that thieves should give up stealing because stealing’s a sin and they should just stop it. But that the thieves should give up stealing, and find honest work, so that they can then have something to share with the needy! Talk about restorative justice! Talk about an evolving community! Talk about being the living bread in the world!

The way the youth described it, being the living bread in the world isn’t about being responsible for a complete revolution, it’s about being someone who takes up the slack, one person at a time. Being willing to support each other in times of crisis, or to take time out of our day—if even just for a couple minutes—to help someone celebrate their joy. Simply making space for others to do what they need to do.

I’ll leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul found in this morning’s passage from Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.”

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

The king, David, ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. Absalom happened to meet the servants of David.

Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice; *
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss, *
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 For there is forgiveness with you; *
therefore you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; *
in his word is my hope.
- 5 My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning, *
more than watchmen for the morning.
- 6 O Israel, wait for the LORD, *
for with the LORD there is mercy;
- 7 With him there is plenteous redemption, *
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as

beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

John 6:35, 41-51

Jesus said to the people, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."