

**Heavenly Nutrition**  
John 6:33-35, 38, 40-51  
August 9, 2009

**I.**

Two weeks ago we heard the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus gave bread to the multitudes because they were hungry. And the essence of that story was the miracle in being able to feed so many people from just twelve loaves. But as far as we know the Bible does not mention the things Jesus actually taught that day, although I'm sure they were important.

Today we heard more familiar words, also about bread. And Jesus once again was speaking to the crowds. But here his teaching was the main point. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Later, during Communion, we will sing the familiar and wonderful hymn by the same name, which was written in 1966 by a Catholic high school teacher during free time in her classroom.

For many people this reading calls to mind the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It's a natural association. And in the Episcopal Church we don't have a metaphysical theory about how the body and blood relate to the bread and wine when we are here kneeling at the rail. But we do know there is a real spiritual connection and that Christ truly is present with us. The details simply are a mystery we do not try to explain.

Many theologians and scholars, however, doubt the Eucharistic character of this reading. They say that Jesus was speaking to crowds of unbelievers more than a year before the Last Supper, and he was working to draw people to him during his lifetime rather than setting the stage for celebrating his death which, after all, still was in the future. They say he wanted them to believe right then that he was who he said he was.

And I understand the logic of the theologians. I agree, from a historical perspective, that when Jesus was speaking to the people on that lovely afternoon in 31 A.D., or whenever it was, he was not trying to teach them about the Eucharist, which did not even exist at the time.

But there's more to it. It isn't just history. Jesus is the divine Son of God, as he so often said in John's Gospel. He knew who he was and was aware of his destiny. It is reasonable to believe that his teachings to the crowds when he was among us also anticipated the church he would leave behind after he was gone. This could be why he said, "I will raise them up on the last day."

And we also know that many of Jesus' divinely inspired teachings not only spoke to the people and culture of that time, but also speak across the centuries to us now in circumstances that could not have been imagined then.

So, when we come before the altar to celebrate the Eucharist, and when we hear our uplifting and inspiring Communion hymns, I pray that we remember our Lord's words as we drink of the cup of the covenant and share in the heavenly bread.

**II.**

And note how I just softened the language Jesus actually used. I used the terms "cup of the covenant" and "heavenly bread." But if we would read further in John's Gospel we would hear Jesus tell people they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life (6:53-54). Some people actually took him literally, and found that message so troubling they no longer could follow him as disciples (6:66).

Today, two thousand years after they were written, those words still can be unsettling. Remember what it was like in school when someone scraped their fingernails across the blackboard. That could be how some people react to these verses.

And if Jesus' words make us uncomfortable now, imagine the reaction at the time by Jews for whom blood was ritually unclean. It must have been quite shocking and provocative. To use a contemporary analogy, the people might have thought Jesus was advertising a grade B horror movie on late night television.

But that's not the case. Jesus was doing once again what he frequently did. He was speaking figuratively. Here, he used his flesh and blood as metaphors to describe himself and the salvation he knew he was destined to offer believers through the cross. And he used eating and drinking as metaphors to describe our inward consumption, in belief through faith, of that eternal hope.

As a result, today's reading is entirely consistent with Jesus' message to humanity. It basically sets forth, in uncompromising language, the uncompromising truth of the Gospel. Rather than giving people bad news, Jesus actually was preaching the Good News.

### **III.**

And so, Jesus calls us, as God's people, to reach out and take the bread he offers. And he similarly calls the church, as Christ's body, to reach out and do the same.

If we do not do that, if we do not partake of the bread Jesus offers, then we can lead spiritually sick and undernourished lives and have no hope for eternity. And in the same way, if the Church, as a community, also does not partake of that bread, then we will have a spiritually sick and undernourished Christianity that cannot faithfully serve Christ in the world.

This is the essence of what Jesus meant when he said "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He was explaining that he came from God in the flesh in order to give himself to us. He was offering the opportunity to know eternal joy and happiness, and to live forever in God's presence.

For first century Jews this was an incredible claim. People had never heard such things. But today's reading is similar to much of what Jesus said in John's Gospel, where he frequently proclaimed his divine nature and holy mission.

And just as background, no extra charge for a brief digression, John's Gospel is unique. Although all four Gospels are consistent in describing our Christian faith, the Gospel of John is a more spiritually oriented story that emphasizes Christ's birth as the revelation of God incarnate, and presents Christ's death as his glorification. Everything about Jesus is elevated in a majestic way that goes beyond how the other three Gospels characterize our Lord.

There are several reasons for this, and one I have mentioned before is that after the crucifixion Mary, Jesus' mother, lived with John and he cared for her (19:26-27). Can you imagine their conversations? What kind of stories could Mary have told? She certainly had a special understanding of Jesus no one else could have had, and she probably shared that with John. No wonder his Gospel is different. Part of his research came from the mother of our Lord.

But, end of sidebar. Back to today's reading and its message. The teaching here is that just as through earthly bread we receive bodily nourishment and a healthy life in this world, through Jesus as heavenly bread we will find spiritual nourishment and eternal life in the next world.

### **IV.**

And this idea of the bread of life also leads to consider the metaphorical alternative, doesn't it? If Jesus is the bread of life, does that mean there also can be the bread of death? How did Satan challenge Jesus during the temptation in the desert? Satan appeared and said to him,

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt. 4:3). If Jesus had done so, what kind of bread would that have been?

Satan bakes this kind of bread today and offers it to us in attractive wrappings. It is the opposite of Jesus' bread which satisfies our hunger. Instead of fulfilling us, this bread of death can make us even hungrier.

This evil bread is evident in the unbelief that pervades the world. And in our affluent consumer oriented society people can be led to crave material things and are never satisfied, but rather become driven to seek them all the more. That's one of the reasons we emphasize inviting people to come to St. Thomas so they can experience more of the Lord's blessings.

Addictions are another example of this bread of death. The result can be physical death, spiritual death, destruction of families, and subversion of a sense of purpose in life. Instead of being satisfied, the hunger for this type of evil bread only increases, creating a never ending cycle from which there is no escape without help.

Jesus, however, tells us that in him as the heavenly bread of life we can escape the sure and certain fate that comes with these various manifestations of the worldly bread of death. And if we do come to Jesus in that way, today's Gospel makes clear that he will receive us, no matter what, and we can live in the blessed assurance that he will raise us up on the last day.

I knew an preacher who used to say that we all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. He would point out how it is easy to fill it up with everything else but God. Temptations and pressures can lead us to focus on other things, and many of them are good, such as our families, jobs, and communities.

And here is his point. If we do not put God in that God-shaped hole in our hearts even the good things in life will be stunted. Our families, jobs, and communities cannot be well served. But if we do place God first, then they will flourish and our hearts will be filled.

Jesus offers us himself to satisfy that hunger within us. In today's Gospel he spoke in metaphors, but he calls us in truth and in love to a better life than we could ever imagine.

## V.

And the time will come when we will look back upon how we responded to this offer of the bread of life. On that glorious day we all will be called to account for the content of our lives. And at that time the important things will not be our piety, or our church attendance, or the parish committees on which we served, although those all are important.

The real test will not be whether we were successful, but whether we were faithful. We will be judged not by what we achieved, but by what we believed. The question will not be whether we struck it rich, but whether we answered the call.

This in many ways describes the human predicament. We work and try very hard to do good things, but we are not satisfied. We spend money and energy on that which is not real bread, and remain hungry. Jesus called people then, and he calls us now, to consume him in faith and belief. And he promises that if we do so we will thirst and hunger no more in this world, and we will be with him forever in the next. *Amen.*