

Bread the Gift of Relationship
 Sermon by Pastor Anne Dwiggins
 August 5, 2018
 Pentecost 11 – Lectionary 18
 John 6:24-35; Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29

We begin with these words from the Prayer of the Day: Lord, “fill us and this world in all its need with the life that comes only from you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.”

Today, everywhere you look, bread! From the Hebrew Bible, the story of God’s people in the wilderness. There is no food, the people complain, and God provides “a fine flaky substance,” manna.

Then the psalm – it retells this wilderness story of “grain from heaven,” “the bread of angels.”

And finally the lesson from John’s gospel. Last Sunday, you remember, Jesus was at the Sea of Galilee and there was a huge crowd after him. Jesus tested Philip: how are we going to feed this mob of people? Then Jesus received 5 barley loaves and 2 fish from a boy in the crowd; he gave thanks and distributed the food. There was enough to go around and an abundance of leftovers, 12 baskets full. The people were so amazed, they wanted to take Jesus “by force to make him king.” (John 6:15)

I have to tell you, when I saw today’s text from John, I had a few choice thoughts about Pastor Renata and her choice of vacation dates. Last week, this week, and continuing for the next 3 weeks, our gospel lessons are from John 6. Five weeks on bread, as Jesus continues to unpack and interpret last week’s feeding miracle, as he goes deeper and deeper into the mystery that is the “bread of life.” For preachers, this series of 5 Sundays is notoriously difficult. Thanks, Renata!

And, too, I confess these texts don’t bring out the best in me. The complaining of the Israelites drives me crazy. God brought them out of slavery; God saved them from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea, but they’re still back in Egypt! Things were so much better there! They are certain Moses has a death wish for them.

Why aren’t these people grateful? Can’t they see what God has done for them?

And then the people with Jesus: they don’t have a clue what Jesus is talking about. They just witnessed an amazing feeding miracle, bread and fish multiplied for a huge crowd, with leftovers! – but still they ask for a sign so they might believe Jesus? Don’t they have an ounce of imagination – or should we say faith?

I even find myself impatient with Jesus. Yes, Jesus! As usual in the gospel of John, the people are down here and he’s up there. They’re thinking one thing, and he’s on a whole different plane. It’s like Nicodemus all over again, when Jesus talks about being born from above, and Nicodemus wonders how one can be born a second time from the womb. It’s like the woman at the well, when Jesus talks about “living water,” and she wants this water so she will no longer have to haul buckets back and forth. I want to shake Jesus and say, they’re not getting it! Come down a notch! Speak their language!

Putting my pique aside, however, John, chapter 6 has to be one of the richest descriptions of Jesus – and one of the richest statements of God’s promise - in the Bible. It is no wonder our lectionary gives inordinate time to Jesus as bread. Even with 5 weeks of preaching and study, we will still not fully understand, appreciate, or grasp Jesus’ claim, “I am the bread of life,” or his promise, “whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus puts before us today an invitation, the invitation of all invitations. He says, Come to me: I “can satisfy every human need.”ⁱ Jesus offers himself. In him, our lives will have true, ultimate, eternal meaning. He wants to know us. He wants us to know him.

Put simply, Jesus wants a relationship, with us. A relationship of intimacy and abundance that feeds body, mind, soul, and spirit. A relationship that starts in this life, continues in death, and opens into a glorious new life. In this relationship, we will be filled; we will be satisfied.

I like the way Gail Ramshaw put it: “Eating this bread we come to realize that all our life, like all our bread, comes from God, and that with God our life is full, bread or not.”ⁱⁱ

Relationships. Not the easiest thing in the world, as we all know. Right now our national dialogue is in grave danger because relationships among groups of people are so strained. Relationships take effort, and a strong desire to make them work. They take respect and careful listening, give and take, and the ability to laugh at oneself. Relationships take time. They need to be made a priority.

The folks in the wilderness might just teach us something about relationships. “The whole congregation of the Israelites” was stuck in the past. Moses had led them out of slavery, out of Egypt, but mentally they’re still back there, in that place where their lives had been made “bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.” (Exod. 1:14) “If only we had died . . . in the land of Egypt, when we . . . ate our fill of bread.”

We know what it’s like to be stuck. We are unhappy in our job, we want something more fulfilling, but we delay in finding a new position, because at least the old job and old people are known, familiar, predictable. Or think about the common reaction to domestic violence. The victim may recognize the danger to him or herself and the children, but there are so many things standing in the way of freedom. A different future might be safer, but it is new, unknown, with monumental hurdles. The thinking goes, it’s better to stay with the monster you know.

We also know what it’s like to find ourselves in a wilderness. Wildernesses are wild, desolate, deserted places. In the wilderness there are scorpions and serpents. There is no cooling water. When we find ourselves in a wilderness, we feel alone, unprotected, and we know only fear and foreboding.

That’s exactly where the people of Israel were - mentally in slavery, and physically in the wilderness. They were fearful, and they let their complaints be known to God. (Which is not a bad thing, by the way. Complaints fill the Bible – think of Job, think of the psalms of lament. Today’s lesson attests that God hears our complaints).

But back to the people . . . God said, if I want a relationship with these people, I going to have to show them the way. I will need to teach them who I am, that I love them, and that they can trust me.

So . . . God enrolled them in what Daniel Erlander calls “the wilderness school.”ⁱⁱⁱ Today the people are at week 6 of a 40-year curriculum of relationship-building. In this relationship curriculum, they will learn that God listens. As God gives the manna and quail, they will learn that God provides for their needs. They will learn that God is steadfast and faithful, and does not forget them even when they complain, turn away, or flirt with other gods. As the glory of the Lord appears to them, they will learn of God’s power and majesty. They will learn that there is no other god but this God.

It is in the wilderness - in this lonely and fear-filled place where former certainties are stripped away, when they meet life in its most elemental form – that the people will come to know God (and themselves) most intimately.

It's a hard school; the people had to repeat a lot of grades. It will take a whopping 40 years to get through. The original wanderers, even Moses, will not walk at graduation – it will be their children who cross that stage into the Promised Land.

Did you ever consider that we are enrolled in the wilderness school? When we were baptized, we took our seats in the kindergarten of the wilderness school of relationship-building. Like the Israelites, I've found the teaching continuous and sometimes difficult. We students become weary and do we complain! But we have Jesus, listening, comforting, challenging.

Church, coming together here in community, is an important part of relationship school. Church is where we hear Jesus' words and promises . . . where we recognize that good gifts come from God and not through our own efforts . . . where we are challenged to see Jesus in all places and situations and people.

In God's school, we take daily field trips. We go out to our homes, our work, our schools, our leisure activities, working to put what we know of Jesus into practice.

And finally as God's students, we come to know, as did Paul, that “for now we see in a mirror, dimly.” Now we “know only in part” – only later will we know fully, as we have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12) We don't always get what Jesus teaches us. But, still, we hold out our hands and open our hearts to receive the “bread of life.”

So in the end, I will admit grudging sympathy for the clueless Israelites wandering in the wilderness and for those people who spoke with Jesus. The Bible suggests that none of us are the brightest students in God's wilderness school of relationship-building.

There is such great hunger for meaning in our world – such hunger for Jesus, the bread that feeds all of life. Much like the Israelites, in these uncertain and anxious times, people are seeking that which makes sense of this world and our part in it. We are so hungry, and Jesus offers real, hearty, fulfilling food.

Just a sideline! Yes, there is bread everywhere before us this morning. I would surely be remiss if I didn't at least mention the kind of hunger that gnaws at people's stomachs, right here, in D.C. According to the Feeding America website, 1 in 8 people in D.C. struggles with hunger, including 1 in 5 children. People experiencing hunger in D.C. reportedly need almost \$53 million more a year to meet their food needs.^{iv} Part of God's curriculum is a call to action, a call to relationship with these who do not enough to eat. This is a not-so-subtle plug for support of our own Food Pantry and other feeding initiatives in this city. As the manna was God's first and fundamental response to the Israelites, as feeding that crowd was Jesus' first concern, so this is an essential task for those of us who know Jesus as the “bread of life.” Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, “Bread of Life Sermon Series,” Craft of Preaching - Working Preacher, www.workingpreacher.org, 7/23/2012.

ⁱⁱ Gail Ramshaw, Treasures Old and New, Images in the Lectionary, 2002, p. 185.

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Erlander, Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe, 1992, p. 7.

^{iv} www.feedingamerica.org.