

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Today we hear the second of five passages from the Gospel of John that together are called the “Bread Discourse.” You’ll remember that last week we heard John’s version of the miraculous feeding of five thousand folks who all ate from five loaves and two fish brought by a boy who no doubt intended this to be his own lunch. People in that day relied on just a few food staples for their sustenance. Chief among these was bread, which constituted one-half of a person’s caloric intake in much of the ancient Mediterranean region. Certainly those people would be astounded by the variety of foods available to us today.

Sometimes it seems our world revolves around food. Our bodies need it, and our senses crave it. It often serves as the basis for our hospitality. We entertain with it. We show love with it. When folks are going through hard times, we often respond with food. When someone is sick, or there’s a death, we’re there with a covered dish. If there’s a happy event, we respond the same way: the birth of a baby, moving into a new home...food is not just a form of consolation. It’s also a means of celebration.

Food is one of the primary ways we show our love for each other, whether it’s meals we prepare for our families or a means of reaching out to others, as we do at Welcome Table each month. For most of us, preparing food is a craft, a skill we’re taught and that we develop through practice. Some folks have culinary abilities that seem to be God-given gifts. Either way, we know that we’ve been gifted when someone brings us food. Food meets our physical needs. It also meets our emotional needs. In that sense, it seems to have a magical power over us that we often find hard to resist.

Apparently the power of food over those five thousand people who were recipients of Jesus’ miraculous and radical hospitality along the shore of the Sea of Galilee leads some of them to go looking for him after he leaves there. But when they catch up with Jesus, he’s not so kind as he was before. “You’re following me for the wrong reason,” he tells them. “You’re not here because of who I am and what I did, not because of the signs you saw; you’re following me because you filled yourselves with bread and fish, with food that perishes.”

Have you ever finished a meal and realized it just didn’t satisfy you? After finishing it, you wanted something else, something more, even if your physical hunger had been fed? You’re not alone. I searched the internet to find out why people overeat and I found something that may be the key to both the problem and the solution. One so-called expert mentioned that the trigger can be “just a tiny little void of nothingness.” A tiny little void of nothingness that we seek to fill with food, or with other substances and behaviors that are temporary “fixes” at best and harmful to us at worst.

Somewhere along the line we’ve stopped regarding food as simply a way to sustain our bodies. We’ve given it the power to fill all our needs. And that just doesn’t happen. There’s only one kind of food that can do that: the Body of Christ. The bread of heaven has the power to nourish our spiritual hunger, the spiritual hunger that often presents itself as “just a tiny little void of nothingness.” When we come to the Eucharist in a spirit of humility and openness, the bread of heaven fills our hearts and minds with the knowledge and love of Christ, and that tiny little void of nothingness is no longer empty, but full of God’s life-giving, life-saving grace.

So we should be mindful and prayerful about what we’re seeking when we partake of the bread of heaven we receive at the Eucharist. Eucharistic Prayer C makes that clear in these words: “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily

serve the world in his name.” The Body of Christ is not meant just to nourish those individuals who receive it. It’s a means to build up the Body of Christ that is the Church, as our Epistle lesson today makes clear.

Building the Body of Christ, building anything for that matter, seems like work. Jesus told the crowd that sought him in today’s “Bread” passage not to work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life. Yet when they asked him what they must do to perform the works of God, he answered them that the work of God is belief in him whom God has sent. It just doesn’t add up. Especially next to the Letter to the Ephesians that clearly states each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift; each of us was given gifts to be used to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. We’re right back where we started. We don’t understand what we’re supposed to “do” anymore than we understand how we’re nourished by the bread of heaven. Of course, that’s the point: we’re not supposed to understand; we’re supposed to believe and live in faith.

The question becomes, how do we invite others to partake of this bread that endures for eternal life? Even when we’re completely sure of it, faith is something that’s hard to describe, and difficult to share. The people we know, just like the people in our Gospel story and in all the years since, want something tangible. They’re not ready to buy unless they can see and feel the product. They want to be sure it’s worth their time and trouble. And we find ourselves marketing our religion and our institution rather than witnessing to our faith. We offer everything that **WE** have: traditional and reverent worship, a great community, good food...but what we have is not what sustains us.

You may recall a story about people in China in the nineteenth century who were called Rice Christians. They went to church because they were hungry—literally hungry for material food and the church fed them rice. They converted to Christianity, were baptized, joined the church and remained active as long as their physical needs were met by the congregation. When their lives improved and they no longer needed the rice the church gave them, they drifted away. They had been fed from food that perishes, but not from food that lasts. Today we are blessed to have Daniel and Rachel Aytes with us. They have been called by God to spread the Gospel in China, a country that is very different from our own. Perhaps they can tell us whether this story about Rice Christians is truth or lore. And I’m sure they can tell us stories that will remind us how blessed we are to have easy access to the food that endures forever.

As we share the Eucharist this morning, I invite you to pay close attention to the words that prepare us to receive the body and blood of Christ together at his altar. What does this meal mean to you? What would your life be like if you could not receive it?

Let us pray.

Thank you, compassionate God, that your Son healed the sick and fed those who were hungry. Satisfy our hunger both for daily bread and for the life-giving bread that lasts forever. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*