

Proper 13-B  
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St. John's Cathedral

Maybe it's because we're in the middle of vacation season that I'm thinking about food for the journey. Journeys are often part of our summer, but journey it is also an important image for the way we move through life – as pilgrims, or explorers or even as reluctant travelers. We're moving. And along the way we need nourishment. The same is true of our mini-journeys that we call vacations.

Not that many years ago every passenger on an airplane was served a meal. It wasn't usually a very exciting or tasty experience, but it seemed to get nourishment into people. It was plastic-wrapped food on a tray and it often felt like eating alone in a crowded space, but we were fed.

My grandson's two-week backpack trip in the Colorado Rockies this summer got me thinking about those mountain hikes I experienced at his age. I remember carefully selecting dehydrated meals in shiny foil bags in my backpacking days. They're light don't take up much room in a pack and you just add water. Voila! Beef stroganoff in a bag. And surprisingly good after a day of hiking.

And there are also those desperation meals on days full of errands when you realize that need lunch and the best option is a Costco hot dog. I have done this a lot!

The bottom line is that we do have to eat – at home or on the road. And it gets more complicated on the road. A few days into the journey and we may long for those well-balanced meals around the family table.

Food for the journey is a theme that surfaces in a couple of ways in today's Gospel reading. Those ways have to do with context, history, God's grace and also the journey of life.

First the context. What comes before today's reading in John's gospel is the story of the feeding of the multitude that we heard last week. A miracle of feeding a huge crowd that had followed Jesus and his disciples. This story is so powerful and important that it appears in slightly different forms in all four gospels. The basic story is that no one had packed enough to feed that huge crowd and certainly no one could go somewhere to buy food.

But, as Jesus gave thanks over a few loaves and fish that appeared, a few bits of food stretched into a feast with plenty of leftovers. It was a miracle of abundance that revealed God's generosity. That story shows Jesus providing 'food for the journey' in a literal way – feeding these folks who had followed him - and also feeding them in a way that nourished their spiritual journeys and ours.

That experience was so profound that many continued to follow him, getting into boats and sort of chasing Jesus and his disciples across the Sea of Galilee. Being fed was such a powerful experience that they wanted more – both more food and probably more of Jesus. And that's where we pick up the story today.

We have to remember that in this gospel from John there are always layers and layers of meaning. And this is no exception. The ensuing conversation between Jesus and the crowd who followed him across the lake is about food, but there is a lot more going on.

Jesus accused them of following him simply because they had gotten a good and satisfying meal. They were able to eat their fill. But he also tantalizes them with the suggestion that what he has fed them is a lot more than a meal. He is offering 'food that endures for

eternal life.’ They respond that that’s something that they would really like to have. Who wouldn’t?

But they are not quite ready to take Jesus’ word for it, so they ask him for a sign – some concrete evidence that they should trust him. Most of us appreciate concrete evidence! They remembered some of their history – from their spiritual ancestors who journeyed in the wilderness in the time of Moses – a long sojourn toward the Promised Land. We heard a bit from that account today in the reading from Exodus. The Israelites on this journey were hungry – and God provided food – both quails that dropped from the sky and manna – a strange, sweet, flaky food with a name, that when translated, means something like ‘What is it?’

They had been grumbling and complaining – hungry and thirsty. They had lost sight of their trust that God would provide for their needs on this long trek. When that food came, it was a sign that God would provide. God’s grace had accompanied them. That’s an easy thing to forget when you’re hungry, worried and stressed out.

And that’s when Jesus makes a connection between this grace-filled feeding and their own journey. “I am the bread of life,” he says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus doesn’t just give them food – Jesus IS the food.

This whole complicated conversation about Jesus being the bread points to a way that people were fed in a way that satisfies more than physical needs. That isn’t to diminish the importance of God providing for our physical needs. We do get hungry. Our bodies do need the nourishment that a decent meal provides. In our love and care for those who are hungry, we are moved to provide something for them to eat from the abundance we enjoy.

But we have other kinds of hunger, too. Sometimes we say, for instance, that we are looking for something that nourishes our soul. When we're simply hungry for food, we might rummage through the refrigerator for something appealing -- a chunk of cheese, some leftover pizza, a bit of ice cream. Maybe we've all had that feeling in one form or another. Sometimes we can satisfy that hunger, sometimes we can't. We just stare at an open refrigerator.

That deeper dimension of spiritual hunger is harder to describe, but not impossible to satisfy. Certainly the people who followed Jesus so relentlessly had appreciated the food that they were given. Most likely they were peasants who did not live with a lot of abundance. A meal was a true gift.

But their pursuit of Jesus, I think, was about something else. It was about a longing for God. A longing for hope. A longing for healing. A longing for relationship. They sensed that Jesus could lead them in that direction. He was the bread for their journey.

I was thinking this week about the ways that we also have those same longings and desires. For assurance, for hope, for healing, for relationship. We are fed here with the Bread of Life as we share Eucharist—a holy meal. And we are also fed through the gift of a community and all that offers. We're fed through the caring the prayers of others. We're fed through the opportunities we have to share with those who need our care. Those things are like an extension of the table.

Earlier this week I had a call from a woman from out of state whose son had died in a very tragic way in Seattle a few months ago. Part of his journey was spending some time in Spokane and he came here to the cathedral to find someone to listen to him and pray with him. He had found that kindness in a conversation with a priest and told his mother about it.

That priest was Nic Mather and I was able to connect her with Nic to assist her with her deep grief. Perhaps that contact became, in a sense, some food for her journey – a sharing of the compassion, the love of Jesus.

In the parish I served just before coming here, several of the people in that congregation would say after receiving communion, “Bread for the journey.”

May our journeys be nourished by the bread of life, a bread we share with others.