

Proper 14-B
Aug. 11-12
St. John's Cathedral

A few years ago on the last Sunday that I served as interim at St. Stephen's, the youth group had asked that we use 'real bread' rather than communion wafers that day. I was happy to cooperate with that request and bought some nice Greek pita bread for that Sunday. As I moved along the altar rail administering communion that morning I put a small piece of bread into the hand of a little boy who received communion all the time. He looked at it, then looked at his father and asked, "What's that?"

"That's bread," I answered, trying to stifle a laugh and remembering the liturgy professor who once said that one of the greatest acts of faith is to accept that communion wafers are really bread.

Bread is at the center of today's gospel reading as it was last week as well. If I were give a title to last week's sermon it would be "bread for the Journey." Today's would be something like "You Are What You Eat."

What we heard today in the gospel reading is part three of a continuing story that began with the feeding of the multitude and then moved to a conversation between Jesus and a crowd who followed him across the Sea of Galilee after that miraculous feeding, wanting more. -- wanting to be in relationship with Jesus in some way.

But in today's gospel reading we see the crowd's mood begin to change. They are complaining – murmuring in some translations. How, they wonder, can Jesus, a local guy—a man whose family they know – be making claims like he has been

making. Claims that he is the bread that came down from heaven. It is as if they are saying, “Who do you think you are, anyway?”

But Jesus continues the conversation, suggesting that they really can't understand this unless they are drawn to him by the Father. (More accurately translated, it is something closer to being 'dragged' to him by the Father.) Being drawn to the father suggests hearing and learning more deeply.

And Jesus continues to assert that he is the bread of life – the living bread from heaven. This is bread that has life-giving qualities. It is bread that is associated with his flesh.

John's gospel is not always the easiest to read. It is full of images and suggestions and we also notice that the people to whom Jesus speaks often seem incredibly dense. They just don't seem to get it. So Jesus continues to repeat and then deepen the information he gives. And as we listen, that helps us to deepen our understanding.

Of course we immediately make a connection between living bread and the Eucharist because we are part of a 2,000 year tradition of gathering for this meal as part of our worship. We are, in a way, fueled by this living bread. But more than fueled. We are formed and shaped and transformed by this bread, whether we eat it from a loaf or from our more traditional communion wafers. In the Eucharist we take Jesus into ourselves.

In Rite I, our more traditionally worded liturgy, we pray that we be filled with God's grace and heavenly benediction and be made one body with Jesus, that he may dwell in us and we in him. Jesus dwells in this body we call the church and

also within us individually. That reminds us of something that we already know: that when we eat this bread – this living bread – we are taking Jesus into ourselves and into our community. And the logical next step is that we are both nourished and transformed. In a sense, we are becoming what we eat.

(A catechism moment) Eucharist is a sacrament. In the physical act of eating the bread and drinking the wine we receive the inward and spiritual grace of receiving Jesus himself. Our union with him is strengthened.

This past Wednesday I sat with some friends one afternoon to celebrate the upcoming wedding of two of them. At one point our conversation turned to health and nutrition – trying to get the right things into our bodies to keep us healthy.

That kind of conversation happens a lot these days -- perhaps even more at my age. We live in a time when nutrition is often a topic of conversation or concern. We're going for whole grains. Watching our carbs. Cutting down on the fries and snack foods. We're paying attention to where our produce, meat and fish come from. We want to be healthy and energetic. We want to be kind to our bodies.

The nutrition that Jesus is talking about is a bit different, but just as important. He is talking about eating bread that makes us new. My friend, Kathy Cooper, was a priest and Hospice chaplain here in Spokane for many years. She loved to preach a children's sermon she called "Wonder Bread." It was about a food that is amazing (and wonderful) in its capacity to nourish our souls and our lives. A food that draws us closer to Christ – disarms our hearts—opens us to new ways of seeing the world around us.

We get a hint about some of that transformation in one of the newer Eucharistic prayers in our tradition – Prayer C from Enriching our Worship. Toward the end of the prayer we pray: “Grant that we, burning with your Spirit’s power, may be a people of hope, justice and love.”

This is a prayer for transformation that may re-align our priorities. Open our eyes. Enliven us in new ways. Draw us into the community that is the Body of Christ and also nudge us in to the wider community with new eyes and a new spirit. What might it mean to be a people of hope, justice and love?

There is a whole list of suggestions in the reading we heard from Ephesians: speaking the truth, managing our anger, speaking in a way that builds others up, being kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. That’s a short list, but a beginning. It’s a list of some outcomes of a transformed life.

There could be much more on this list. Things we might regard as core values for our lives.

A friend of mine likes to ask the questions, “What makes up the bread of our lives?” and “How do we live the bread we have eaten?” In other words, how do we offer ourselves to others and to the needs of the world in a way that reflects the ‘wonder bread’ that feeds us and makes us strong in our faith? What are the ways that show forth Jesus dwelling in us and we in him?

A few years ago we had a diocesan convention whose theme was “Bread for the World” -- a convention where we looked beyond ourselves kind of through the lens of Eucharist. Two things about that convention stood out in my memory. One

was the opening worship when every church in the diocese presented a loaf of bread made by its members to represent the 'bread of our lives.'

The other was a hymn by a contemporary composer Bernadette Farrell,'
Bread for the World.

The verse I remember best goes like this:

Bread for the world: a world of hunger

Wine for all peoples: people who thirst.

May we who eat be bread for others.

May we who drink pour out our love.

That would make a pretty good prayer for us every day. It's about becoming what we eat. It's about being held close to Jesus' heart in the Eucharist, but also reaching forth our hands in love.

May our meal we call Eucharist nourish us deeply that we may also be bread for others.