

August 9, 2009

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14b)

John 6:35, 41-51

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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The Stuff of Life

When Jesus talks about the bread of life, he is talking about what really matters in life. He is talking about what is of ultimate worth, the bread that leads to eternal life. And in his disciples he is running up against at least two things that get in the way of our taking hold of real life or make that much more hard than it needs to be.

Jesus' longish discussion of himself as the Bread of Life is prompted by the difficulty the disciples have in grasping the meaning of the feeding of the multitudes. In John's Gospel there are nine 'signs'—he never calls them miracles although we might and often do—and John makes clear that he wants us to see beyond the signs to the source of all life. At the end of his story of Jesus, after Jesus appears to Thomas in the resurrection, he says: "You have seen and believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Blessed are those who grasp the meaning of the signs and do not get caught up in their own individual desire or need to see a miracle or hear the voice of God speaking directly in their ear, or wonder why they hear of someone being healed and why they or their mother or brother or cousin or aunt are not granted such healing. The disciples are not so unlike us. When we wish to see a miracle or be granted something that would make it easy for us to believe we are often and almost militantly missing the point of what Jesus is saying and doing.

It is hard for us to see the signs of God's love when we are so bound up with our individual needs and our mostly proper concerns for justice and fairness. I've shared the story with some of you in the past of my friend Jack Woodward who was part of a team sent from the Episcopal Church in the early 70s to learn about the extraordinary wave of miraculous healing that were being reported from East Africa. On one occasion he was outside the church in which a service was taking place and he saw a woman who was joining in the prayers and singing while cradling her infant child who was, according to Jack, visibly near death. He asked her through an interpreter how she could be praying and praising God while her child was dying. She told him that she did not believe that God was going to heal her child but that—and she pointed out a boy of six or seven who was playing nearby—she knew that God had healed that boy when he was a baby and so knew that live or die, her baby is in God's care. This is a hard, hard word and I'm not sure that I would have her faith in her circumstances, but she really understood what the signs were all about. God grants us signs of the Love that brought us into being and sustains us through thick and thin, the love that is embodied and made incarnate for the children baptized this day in their parents and godparents. She did not whine about fairness—why that child and not hers. She did not see injustice in

one being healed and another not. She saw a sign of God's love and was able to take it as such.

The second thing that tends to get in the way of our seeing the signs is in our tendency to seek status even in the mist of seeing the signs. That is what is going on when the Judaizing party in John's world, --those who opposed the gospel of Jesus as something that will upset the apple cart--when the opposition starts grumbling. It is not that they are dreadful people who do not want to know good news. It is that they have glimpsed or begun to grasp the grace of God in the past and have turned that story into something that assures them of their status. That is why John tells us of the arguments about God giving manna to the Hebrews in the wilderness. The opposition have become the protectors and guardians of the story, the keepers of right doctrine, and so the people with some sense of place in this world. But to them Jesus says in effect: 'Do not turn your own history of grace into a means of domination such that protecting your position relative to others gets in the way of your knowing the extraordinary grace of God.' When you find yourself grumbling about something that might well be grace for others but doesn't immediately sit well with you, take a look to make sure you are not letting your sense of your self and your position in the world blind you to seeing a sign of God's grace.

When I was talking with the parents and godparents of those being baptized this day I suggested that one of the things we do for each other in the community of faith and so one of the ways in which they will fulfill their promises to see that the children they present are brought up in the Christian faith and life, is that we help one another see ourselves and the world as God sees us and the world. In part that might mean godparents helping their godchildren see that all those times when their parents put food on the table it wasn't just about the food. It was about the love they have for those children. It might mean teaching that just because you enjoyed being the king or queen in yesterday's game, that does not mean it is your God-given right to play that role every day. Someone else might enjoy themselves as well. If everyone enjoys themselves then there is more joy for everyone. That is a counter intuitive lesson in a world that teaches scarcity, but it is helping the children see the Bread of Life. It is the kind of spiritual work we can do ourselves and help each other do when our church is threatened and there is a lot of noise about the Bible saying this or that and community demanding that we do this or that, it is so easy to miss the grace that is being poured out, especially if those who are blessed in this way were formerly defined as outside the possibility of God's love.