



SUNDAY SERMON

Imitators of God

A couple of weeks ago I was able to attend the Water Ministry end-of-summer party. Larry Shelley, the program director, hosted a BBQ with all the trimmings: baked beans and coleslaw and hot links and smoked chicken. This is only the second summer we've been able to extend the Water Ministry through June and July — thanks to your generous giving towards our outreach ministries, and all the faithful volunteers who make Water Ministry possible throughout the year. I know our guests are grateful to have showers and laundry available to them during the miserable DC summer.

It was a fun and relaxed day, and there was room for me to join the guests for lunch. We passed remarks about all the rain we've had, and upcoming plans for summer fun (which everyone seemed to have). It was all very ordinary, just a community gathered around a table and sharing a meal. There were no deep revelations or moving personal stories — in other words, it was just like most BBQs you've ever been to. But it was a chance for me to sit down and share a meal with people I don't normally get to interact with, and I'm grateful that St. C's is able to offer this space where people from different life circumstances can come together.

Afterwards, I started to think that maybe this is the main point of the Water Ministry: not the food we provide, but the place. The opportunity to build community. A place to deconstruct the walls we build between us, to come together as one people of God around a table where everyone is welcome. It's not the bread; it's what the bread means; it's what sharing the bread enables us to do.

The lectionary gets a little repetitive in August. We're in the middle of a five-week long meditation from the Gospel of John about bread, and hunger, and the food that truly satisfies. It all started at the end of July with John's version of the feeding of the 5000, the miracle where Jesus fed 5000 hungry, weary followers with only five loaves and two fish. John uses this miracle story as a springboard for Jesus to teach his followers that he is the living bread, the bread of life that came from heaven. And that unless we partake of this bread — the bread of life — we'll always be hungry.

In the Gospel of John, it's not the bread itself; it's what the bread means. It's our souls that are hungry, and only Jesus the bread of life can satisfy that spiritual hunger.

This is different from the other Gospels. In the other Gospels, bread is really bread, water and wheat baked into bodily sustenance for followers of Jesus at the bottom of the economic ladder. These are people who didn't know where their next meal was coming from. When Jesus teaches them to pray, "Give us today our daily bread," that wasn't a spiritual metaphor, but a real prayer for real food.

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DATE

15th Sunday after
Pentecost
Sunday, August 19, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

Of course, we're used to hearing that prayer both ways: literal bread for those who are hungry in body, and spiritual sustenance for those who are hungry in soul. But— we hear both meanings only because we've been reading Matthew's version and John's version back to back for the past two thousand years. The idea that there was a deeper meaning behind the bread starts with John, and John was writing his Gospel not to complement Matthew's, but as a challenge to the accepted interpretations of Jesus' life that had been presented in a more or less uniform way in the other three Gospels.

John expands Jesus' meaning, showing us how Jesus makes a difference for everybody, not just for the poor. The danger of course, especially for us who aren't poor, who don't have to worry about the price of bread, is that it's easy to forget that there really are hungry people in the world, and instead just focus on our spiritual development instead. Christianity can easily take on an otherworldly quality, a religion focussed almost entirely on what's going to happen to us in the life to come, rather than on what's happening to real people right now in this flesh-and-blood world that we actually live in.

John doesn't help matters with his distillation of Jesus' central message. In the synoptic Gospels, it's clear that Jesus' central idea is "the Kingdom of God": the Kingdom of God is near, and it's coming to the here and now: your Kingdom come on Earth, as in heaven. "On earth" is the important part of that petition; the Kingdom already is in heaven, so no worries there.

John doesn't use the Kingdom of God metaphor — he doesn't even include the Lord's Prayer. Instead, his metaphor for Jesus' big idea is "eternal life." So for example, in the Gospel passage today Jesus says: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life . . .

Otherworldly? Certainly. But to John's credit, I actually think it's a mistake that we understand eternal life only as a future hope, only as something to look forward to when we die. The phrase John uses — that we translate "eternal life" — in Greek is *zoe aionion*. *Zoe* means life (like zoo, right?). *Aionion* — which we translate eternal — this is the same word we get "eon" from. So think eons, ages. A better translation for this phrase *zoe aionion* might be "the life of the ages."

Behind this phrase for Jesus would have been the Jewish teaching about "the present age" versus "the age to come." The present age — the way we live now — is marked by injustice and greed. It is an age of corruption and death, both literal and metaphorical. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. People look out for their own and turn away from the stranger, the other who they don't understand. Those with power exploit and destroy the people of God— and sometimes they don't even know that's what they're doing.

But Jesus has come to pull us out of this age of death and into the life of the age to come. And that's not something to hope for after we're dead. No. Eternal life — the life of the ages — begins now. The life of the ages is abundant life — and it is God's desire for everything and everyone on earth, starting today.

It's not the bread; it's what the bread means. This is what the bread means for John: Strength for the journey. Abundant life, for the whole world. The life of the ages. The table we set is open to all people. And the bread we share is food for both body and soul.

That's true of this altar, around which we are about to gather. And it's true for the long dining tables downstairs in room 215, where God's people gather four times each week to share a meal, and build community. That bread too will feed body and soul, no matter which side of the serving line you're standing on.

Amen.

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