

Jesus the Bread of Life

A sermon preached by Anne Carey at Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA
August 26, 2012

Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34:15-22 (15)
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Let us pray:

Creator God, you make all things new. In this hour, open our hearts and minds to hear your word anew, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, inspire us to be your word of hope in our world that longs for new life. In the name of the risen Christ, we pray. Amen.

Well, the luck of the draw has finally run out for me. Actually, it ran out for me the last time I stood before you in this role. The schedule of lectionary readings had been kind to me up to that point. There had been the opportunity to share reflections on gospel readings from Mark, Luke, and Matthew. Mark: the earliest gospel in our Bible, the version of the Jesus story that includes neither an account of his birth nor a direct sighting of his resurrection, the version that uses the word "immediately" to describe the actions of Jesus more than anywhere else in scripture. An acquaintance of mine once said that whoever wrote Mark wrote as if he were double-parked! Then there's Luke: people like me love Luke because his version of the Jesus story includes lots of those wonderful parables and many women, more than in the other gospels, and some of them have real moxie. Luke's Jesus is more of a lover than a fighter, and he's not even cranky when he's hanging from the cross. And of course there's Matthew, which has been called "the book of the church," with its frequent citations of Hebrew scripture that purport to show how Jesus is its fulfillment, and who doesn't love the Sermon on the Mount that gives us

the Beatitudes and all those sayings about salt. A rich heritage in these three gospels, and I love them each for different reasons.

And now we come to the gospel of John for the second time in my preaching career here, and to be honest, this is where I've been known to stumble. The other three gospels tend to focus primarily on the human aspect of Jesus, and maybe that is why they're more appealing. They show us a Jesus who is more like us than not, and that just feeds my attitude of "it's all about me." But John consistently depicts Jesus in the exalted role of Son of God rather than son of Mary, and the whole perspective of this gospel is lofty and even cosmic. John's Jesus is way more than just a really, really, *really* good person. I'll confess that one of my earliest sermons was on the great "I am" passages in John -- and it was a disaster. I was fresh out of divinity school, preaching to a little congregation in North Seattle, and I could tell by the blank looks on the faces of folks that my abstract and disconnected prose, quoting obscure philosophers and theologians, was going absolutely nowhere with them. It was a humbling experience, and I hope I've learned a thing or two more since then about humility, and not just in the reading of John.

So, with my having lowered your expectations for any wisdom, let's see how we do with today's passage. It's the final section of what is often called the Bread of Life discourse. We've heard the earlier sections over the past few weeks, in which Jesus is speaking about himself as that bread, the bread that gives life and satisfies for all eternity, the bread that comes from God. That message is repeated in what we read this morning. Of course, for us Christians today, we think of this bread in relation to the Holy Communion that we share around the table each week, the sacramental image of the body and blood of Christ. Scholars tell us that John's gospel was produced later than the other three, so that the eucharistic meal might have been a practice by the time this writing appeared. There's another way to think of this metaphor of life-giving bread

that comes from our origins in the Jewish tradition. Tom Gumbleton suggests that this bread of life can be understood as the word of God, the teaching from God, the Torah that Jesus and his Jewish followers knew from childhood. So we are taught, and we learn, from this bread of life that God has given us in the person and work of Jesus. We are in fact disciples, which just means, at the root of that word, "the ones who learn." This bread of life can nourish both body and mind as it makes of us disciples.

Clearly, and this is so for us today as it was for some of those in our text this morning, not everyone who hears this bread-of-life teaching can take it in, can in-corporate it, which just means, at its root, "to take something into the body, to embody something." Whether the bread of life is the sacrament of Holy Communion that is given from God, or the Word that is for the Jewish Jesus and his followers the Torah that is given from God -- or the bread of life might be all of the above -- for some of the disciples, the learners, it is just too hard. They can't do it, and so they drift away. So Jesus asks his closest friends, "Can you stand it? Can you stay? Or do you want to leave?" Don't you love how he asks them what they want? That is so Jesus-like. Jesus the Jew loved questions! It reminds me of a Yiddish anecdote that Dear Abby once shared in a column: A non-Jew asks a Jew, "Why does a Jew answer a question with a question?" The Jew responds, "Why shouldn't a Jew answer a question with a question?" So of course, Simon Peter, also answers the question of Jesus with his own question. It's a very familiar question for Lutherans because we sing it every time we prepare for communion: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Some people think Peter has borrowed this response from the Lutheran Book of Worship, but I suspect the borrowing was the other way around.

And so Jesus, at least in the gospel of John, is left with a much reduced band of faithful followers. I like to think of Holy Trinity Church as like that small band of disciples: those who

remain, and endure, even in the face of all the challenges of smallness. It's not that easy to believe what Jesus has done for us, that joyous exchange that Luther described so eloquently, in which Jesus takes on our humanity with all its failings and in exchange we receive life and grace. It actually sounds like a pretty good deal for us, so thank you, Jesus.

Still, it's not that easy to choose this life in community. We do live in a time and place in which there are distractions aplenty: social, economic, political. Lord, to whom can we go? Does anybody else have those words of eternal life? How about Facebook? Or Apple? Jon Stewart? Rush Limbaugh? Walmart? Wall Street? Do we want liberty and justice for all? What are we to do when liberty for all and justice for all are goals that are in conflict? Joshua asked the Israelites to choose what gods they would serve, and we have to make that choice as well. The choice is and always will be costly, the decision is and always will be demanding. Lord, to whom can we go? *You* have the words of eternal life.

Walter Brueggemann says that this turning to God, this decision "is a recognition that we are not autonomous to do whatever we may want to do. The God of covenant [Brueggemann continues] is no therapeutic push-over who benignly accepts selfish anti-neighborliness and the cheapening of the human fabric....Joshua knew that default on our decisions does not make them go away, because God is not so easily expelled from our common life." Yes, a hard teaching -- and of all people, Lutherans get that, as when in our confession we say that we are "in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." As Pastor Sandra has pointed out, we are the church of the both-and. By the grace of God, through the joyous exchange, we are freed from that bondage: freed to live, as Luther put it, as free master of all and freed to live as servant of all. Sinner and justified, at exactly the same time! Flesh and spirit, law and gospel, nature and grace, justice and

mercy, God and Christ and Spirit -- I could go on, but you get the picture. If this isn't abundance, I don't know what is.

Karen and I were up in Seattle last weekend, and we drove back to San Mateo on this past Tuesday and Wednesday. On the way, somewhere in southern Oregon, we passed an area that had burned sometime in the recent past. Among the ruins of the former forest were those small trees that were growing up from the blackened ground. We remembered a book that we had both read, called *Forest Primeval: The Natural History of an Ancient Forest*. The author, Chris Maser, imagines the life of a forest in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon over a period of a thousand years. It is a fascinating chronicle. One of the most interesting things about forest development as described by Maser is the need for the occasional fire that renews its growth. Out of the great loss of so much comes a smaller, stronger community of trees, and critters large and small, and beneficial fungi and bacteria. Life of all sorts! Sometimes the dying wood has to be pruned away, or burned away, for renewed life to continue. For me, Holy Trinity is what has remained from the fire and the pruning, and here there is space for new and abundant life.

And what are those words of eternal life that those who remain are to learn from Jesus? Some of them are very hard indeed. "Love your enemies," for example. Just think about how hard that is. Or, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." More than just a paradox! How about "Don't judge and you won't be judged." "Forgive and you'll be forgiven." "You give them something to eat." Easier said than done! Is this really the Good News??

Well...actually, yes. These words of Jesus, hard as they may be (and there are a lot more like this) are words of spirit and life. They are what keep us coming back every week, to hear the word and share the bread of life and the wine of compassion at the table. We come here for Jesus, and we take Jesus with us for the other 167 hours of the week. It's that second part, the

other 167 hours, that truly challenge us, and this is where the counsel from the letter to the Ephesians comes in handy. We're reminded that we have resources to meet the challenges: faith, prayer, truth, integrity, trust in God. What happens here, in word and sacrament, each Sunday morning, gives us hope and provides the fertile seed-bed for our flourishing in faith throughout the week and throughout our life in community. For all this, we can only say: Alleluia, Alleluia, and Amen.