

Bread for Life

08.02.09 Pentecost 9

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

Jesus says in John's gospel, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

Did Jesus mean the spiritual nourishment we feel when we read his parables? Or remembering him eating graciously with all kinds of people, making them feel welcomed and loved? Or when we think of his last supper with disciples, when he gave them bread, saying this is his body, the bread that supports us through Holy Communion?

Spiritual bread? Or physical bread, too? Does God care about both physical and spiritual bread?

In the Exodus story, the people are following Moses in the wilderness and dying of hunger. But God informs Moses that he's heard the people's complaining of hunger, quails come up and cover the camp, as does a layer of dew, the manna; God agrees with the people and sends food; you can't be free without food!

Now Karl Marx, the great economic historian, famously wrote that religion is the opiate of the people; like the drug opium, it keeps them satisfied even with injustice, with hunger – like opium, religion keeps us drowsy, looking toward life after death to make this life palatable. For that reason Marx, the prophet, fought against religion to fight for justice. It is one of the strongest critiques of religion.

Let's imagine that all 6.6 billion of earth's people were invited to a pot-lick. They are arranged according to income, in a line, as a group of 100 people. The first 5 people in the line would normally take enough for themselves and come back later for seconds; they are the richest people in the world, they are us! But because of their wealth, and the varieties of food they can buy, some from all around the world, they take so much that it is as though they each took 12 plates. Five percent of the world population has taken almost 30%! And, the last 25 people in line must share between themselves what was meant for 1 person. These people are from sub-Saharan Africa.

In our country 10% of people do not have enough food to meet their basic needs (4.5 million persons). In the world 1 billion people don't have enough to eat.

Does God care? Do we care?

Arthur Simon, who founded Bread for the World, 35 years ago, passionately believed, yes!

Simon, a pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan, gathered 14 faith leaders, 7 Catholics and 7 Protestants, to talk about ways to fight hunger. Pr. Simon saw poverty close up on the lower east side. Soon thereafter, in 1974, they took the bold and difficult step to found Bread for the World. The purpose: to lobby senators and congress people to make sure that every person had enough to eat. It had real, lasting success. Because of Bread for the World, Congress passed a Right to Food resolution and in 1984 a \$25 million Child survival Fund. Now, even as BfW celebrates, it has put forward a bipartisan bill asking President Obama to outline a national strategy for global development, to strengthen and streamline our nation's aid programs to get more help to those who need it in Africa and elsewhere. We can support that bill!

As Simon wrote,

"Significantly, the word "companion" comes from Latin words that mean "with bread"...to break bread with another is to establish a body, a companionship. This not only says what should be taking place in the Eucharist itself, but also speaks to the point of establishing bonds of companionship, as a reflex action, through the sharing of bread with the whole human family."

Can we separate religion from politics; can people be free without food? Could it be that the perceived duality between physical and spirit is a construct of human thinking, not God's?

But, again, according to John, Jesus says "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hunger, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Many sermons have been and will be preached on Jesus as giving spiritual bread. And on the necessity of converting people to Christianity so that they may "eat" this bread. Is the spiritual more important than the physical?

One of you participated in a theology class at St. Michaels. The professor, a respected Roman Catholic theologian, gave these questions, which seem very pertinent to me, about the health of religion: Does a particular form of religious thought and practice build bridges or set up barriers between people? Does it create qualitative classes of people? Strengthen or weaken a basic sense of trust and relatedness to people and the universe? Stimulate or hamper personal responsibility? Increase or lessen the enjoyment of life? Handle the vital energies of sex and affection in constructive or repressive ways? Encourage the acceptance or denial of reality? Encourage intellectual honesty with respect to doubts? Over simplify the human situation or face its tangled complexity? Emphasize love or fear?

Almost as though he had considered these questions Paul in our reading from Ephesians wrote, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry."

Just as Jesus was known in the breaking of the bread after his resurrection, and during his life he was known scandalously, to eat with "sinners," so we can't break bread (his body!) at the altar without being aware of those in need and wanting to help them! The essentials for life should not be limited by where one is born, but all should have what God gives freely. Ministry mimics the graciousness of God, to rearrange the world to be a mirror of the God who provides enough for all. That all may have a share so that all may live! That the line may be evened out!

In his "Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament": Luther wrote, "When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship...all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and – if you cannot do more – have heartfelt sympathy."

I was looking at our Lutheran denomination's illustrations of the way we fight hunger. And, I felt so grateful because of the way they help us do ministry – spiritual and physical!

Our supermarkets are filled with so many cereals and choices; almost like an opiate; it is easy to accept things as they are. But it is difficult to look at structures that keep food from people. Our denomination and Bread for the World assists us to be ministers, to use our gifts to help the hungry! To change the world, to even out the line. LWR and LWF in giving to help those who hunger exhibits healthy religion.

Our Sunday offering supports anti-hunger ministries in Sub-Saharan Africa. God's global barnyard has supported a woman's bakery in sub-Saharan Africa. She asks for our prayers and sends us hers.

Money is symbolic of the spirit; just as God's spirit moves freely, but also orders the universe, money becomes what we want it to become; our money spent can become food to save someone from starvation and give them the help through hard times to grow food. It can give them the sense and understanding that the God of the universe cares for them. It can communicate the very love of Christ.

Opium, or bread?

The answer finally is expressed by each of us, our awareness, our choices, our giving. (And the health of the church we are in and the religion we practice, whether it includes gratitude to God who gives good; soil, water, sunlight; all those gifts through Christ in whom “all things came into being.” (Jn 1:3.)

In a word, are **we** bread for the world? The choice and answer lies in our commitments, our trust, how we nourish ourselves, and how we nourish others. For it seems that ministry transforms us into bread: the bread that is Jesus Christ, the bread that we receive at the Communion table, the bread that we are for each other; and the bread that we use and share in the form of water, seeds, care for creation that work against the scourge of hunger and for the gift of life.