

Gal. 4: 21-31

St. John 6: 1-15

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

St. Francis of Assisi once commented, “It is not possible to preach the Gospel to empty stomachs”. In making such a statement he was simply pointing to a reality that at some place in our hearts and minds we already know. It is the futility of using mere words to convince others about truth or love, if those words are isolated from actions which confirm them. It appears our Lord already has that clearly in view!

The center and heart of the 6th chapter of the Gospel of St. John, and the portion we read this day is the attempt to disclose who Jesus is so that people, including us, will believe (TRUST) in him. His actions take center stage in the feeding of the 5,000, so that all people will come to know that he provides nourishment for the soul that far outstrips any manna Moses provided in the wilderness or any meal taken by us no matter how delectable. The miracle is not the heart of the story, but the means of calling people to trust that what Jesus gives is deeper than any sign. That is the core for our hearing today. Latter in this chapter people find his statement, “I am the bread which comes down from heaven” too hard to hear and they leave, and he tells them they came just to get their bellies filled and see marvelous signs, but it will not sustain them. They need something more. Real life requires more than a full stomach; it requires a soul focused on the One who sustains and holds us when life takes away easy times, comfortable lifestyles, and material plenty.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent and is called by the Latin term, Laetare. We have come to refer to it as Refreshment Sunday. It is intended as a time to take a break from the rigors of Lenten fasting and discipline, so that we can be renewed and continue on the journey toward Holy Week, the cross, and finally Easter. For it is in these events that we are encountered by the very graces, the Bread of Life, that God wants us to savor and allow to direct us toward fullness of life. We are to enjoy being “refreshed” in order to see that there is something **more**: the full depth of God's great love for us that tends to our greatest needs.

There are many layers to this wonderful Gospel. It is the only miracle story that is recorded in all 4 gospels. In fact it is told twice in St. Mark. In each account the disciples are perplexed about the lack of substance—limited resources, and in each the resources of Jesus out run the most strenuous demands—unlimited possibilities. It is just at this crossroad where human limitations encounter divine provisions that we discover who Jesus really is, and if the text is to be believed, it is in those same tensions that you and I will come to find what we trust and what really fills us.

The question squarely in the headlights is—what does it mean to have life? What sustains us in being alive rather than to just survive? As you know, I am the Director of Pastoral Services for a large retirement community, and such a community is marked by people who have time to look back at how they have spent that time. It raises questions—have I used myself wisely, have I tended to the people close to me as fully as I might, will I leave a meaningful mark on the world, and other ponderings which are really asking ‘what comprises life?’ It is also a place where death is frequently experienced and mortality is keenly felt. We recently completed a set

of seminars on preparing for the end of life, including how to deal with the ethical concerns over how much treatment to seek and when to cease such. It brought about a very sobering set of reflections. It was interesting that as we talked about having a DNR-do not resuscitate-Order that the anxiety in the room went up 10 notches. People had all manner of possible examples to pitch out for consideration and discussion. I found myself having to explain that a DNR only applies if you are already dead, when one person asked, "But what if I am just a little bit alive?" It is an understandable fear, but the whole exchange was really about—what comprises life? Is life defined by physical condition? Is it determined by how much we achieve and accomplish? Is life counted in measure of what we have accumulated so that the one who dies with the most toys is the winner? OR, is being truly alive made up of something that is not material, partial, and so limited? One of the things that becomes powerfully obvious in private conversations with people is that as these questions come to the forefront, and as maturity sets in, it is relationships and the quality of interactions that become far more valuable and serve to define what a meaningful life looks like. Jesus takes seriously the physical and temporal needs of the crowd in our Gospel text, but not as an end in themselves, but as a sign of God's grace AND as an invitation to travel deeper into that grace. The phrase at the end of this pericope—"Gather up all so that nothing is lost" is not about the bread and fish, but about Jesus stretching out his arms to embrace all who hunger to be given sustenance that will sustain them when the normal ways begin to fail us. It is about the abundance of the Kingdom of God over against this world which is available to all who see through faith who Jesus really is.

The Word of God and the Bread of Life become inseparable in the One who has compassion on people, and by whose words they come to actually live—fully and freely as God's. We encounter every time we receive the Eucharist. We are filled with a grace and love that no amount of anguish, hunger, or hurt can undo. The truth is there is in us and all humanity a hunger for God. We may get sidetracked and seduced into believing that we can sustain ourselves, but we mostly know that is an illusion. If you read the remainder of the 6th chapter of John you hear the complaints, the doubts, the reluctance, and even the anger of those who turn away from Jesus. It may be hard heartedness or hard headedness, but I suspect it is rooted in a kind of forlorn hope that there just might be such a bread that will fill what nothing else can.

I have an acquaintance who grapples with a terrible grief over the loss of a daughter. When she speaks of it the pain is present in such a way that it almost feels material. She hurts and out of hurt is angry with the situation and with God. She voices her struggles in lamentation and wonders how God could let this happen, but then will say she feels guilty over saying these things. But you see the very lamentation she expresses is a sign that she wants that relationship to heal her, and even in her complaint there is a trust that she is being heard, however distant at the moment. She is waiting and yearning for bread that will not leave her hungry or go stale. She is in fact alive in a deep way—for in spite of her pain she is living in trust.

In Luther's German Masse there is a prayer after reception which captures the whole of this Gospel: "Almighty God, who gives the true Bread which comes down from heaven, even thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord: Grant we beseech you, that we who have received the Sacrament of his Body and Blood may abide in him and he is us, that we may be filled with the power of his endless life..."

SERMON - THE 4th SUNDAY IN LENT— 25 MARCH 2017

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

“I am the Bread of Life” is spoken to each of us. We will hear Him from the unique places that we trust and struggle, but know this—He is willing to fill us with His life, and feed us with grace that will not grow old.

Amen+