

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

Having friends with a sense of humor can be a welcomed lift and break in a day. There is a couple who periodically send an email page of short quips, and one arrived early this week full of one and two sentenced witticisms, both funny and poignant in this time of Covid madness. The devil whispered to me, “I’m coming for you.” I whispered back, “Bring pizza. When I was a kid, I wanted to be older...this is not what I expected. We can all agree that in 2015 not a single person got the answer correct to, ‘Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?’

The last retort has an amusingly sober quality when we take in the health status of the world at this very moment. As we listen to our friends, family, the people in line at the grocery, and to our own hearts, it is not rare to hear comments like; “I’ll be glad when all of *this* is over!”, or “Do you think we will ever get back to *normal*?”, or “I just want to have dinner with my friends again”. It is safe to surmise that none of us expected to be quite where we are; that from time to time our reserves and inner strength seem depleted, and we do yearn to ‘break bread’ freely, safely, and openly with one another.

The Prayer Book refers to today as ‘The Sunday Next Before Advent’. The language is poetic and a perhaps a bit archaic reflecting its’ pre-Vatican II origins, but its’ value should not be diminished. We are brought to the end of a full Church year; to the close of 52 weeks in which the story of the faith has been told once more so that our participation in all that it brings can be reviewed. Like the Roman figure of Janus who faces two directions, this morning we look back and see how we have been challenged, nurtured, embraced, and fed by the author of creation. We also look ahead to the journey that awaits us for God is never idle.

I know a person who earlier in her life would make all night drives to various venues just to hear her favorite musical group, U2. They are an Irish rock group comprised of 4 men with a deep hunger to cure hunger due to their Christian commitments. One of their first hits (1987) has a haunting set of lyrics.

I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
I have run I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone

But I still haven't found What I'm looking for

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It is the refrain which occurs after each event of seeking and imagined desire that is so striking, and in many ways captures where this liturgical day leads us. Looking back over the span of the

years the question is still with us: ‘have we found what we are looking for’? It is the same question the crowd by the sea of Tiberias is trying to sort out in our narrative for the morning.

The lesson appointed for today is the from the Bread of Life discourse in John’s Gospel. It is the feeding of the 5,000. The text is unique in several ways. One is that this is the *only* miracle story that occurs in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark even have a *second* similar telling with the crowd being 4,000. Other than the crucifixion and Resurrection no other narrative gathers as much attention for the Evangelists. (By the way, it turns up 3 times in our annual lectionary!) It cannot be simply that this miracle merits such notoriety since there are many others recorded that could be just as astounding. There is something beyond the multiplying of bread that is waiting to explode upon hearers. It is that this young Rabbi, now followed to the mountain, is the incarnation, the very presence of the God who gave manna in the wilderness, barley loaves out of nothing for Elisha, and now will be the actual staple element that gives life to the world. The crowd follows because they have seen him heal and they want a second act to the show, and they continue to trapse after him once they have ‘eaten their fill of loaves’. They come and go because they are looking for something they don’t have—‘I still haven’t found what I’m looking for’. It isn’t unlikely that many of us are also longing after something we don’t have. It may be acceptance or comfort or finding meaning in the midst of drabness, or the just courage to believe that the brokenness of this current age is not all there is. I wonder ‘what is the more we are seeking?’ What is the deepest need?

As I get older, (and I pray finally a little more mature) I am finding that many of the larger and more grand expectations and visions I had for my life, career, and family have become “revised”. The perfect house, the perfect education, all the ‘perfects’ have faded and at times that is tough to swallow. But as those have dimmed there is behind the imagined perfections a discovery to be made; that what is present is quite rich and a gift from the giver of all life. Sometimes the illusions mask what is best and already with us. On occasions we have found what we are looking for; we just don’t realize it yet. St. Augustine wrote, “Scarcely anyone bothers to consider God’s marvelous works, his amazing artistry in every tiny seed...People who hold cheap what they see every day are dumbfounded at the sight of extraordinary works even though they are no more wonderful than the others. Governing the entire universe is a greater miracle than feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread, yet no one marvels at it. People marvel at the feeding of the 5,000 not because it is greater, but because it is out of the ordinary. Who is it that now is providing nourishment for the whole world if not the God who creates a field of wheat from a few seeds? And Christ does what God does...”

John weaves a story of encounters and longings and hard sayings; of people who are confounded that this man who has fed them, and then claims to be the Bread of Life which will undo their hunger and thirst, is the son of people they know. It is just too ordinary and too miraculous all at once. What is all this really about? A clue is in Jesus’ taking, and blessing, and breaking, and giving of the bread—we do it every time we gather. It is merely living in the reality of Jesus who is Christ—God’s ultimate gift. He is the one who unmaskes our illusions so that we may be filled the power of his life.

I have been scaling back my library and going through the books is an exercise in memories—it’s like having a scrapbook as each volume harkens from some remembered time or event. The fruitful quality in this is coming to meet old friends who have formed me. One of those is a small paperback by the Orthodox theologian and former dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary in New York,

Alexander Schmemmann. The book is For the Life of the World. Every page seems to be so packed that you can never get it all. At the beginning of the first chapter, he starts with a statement about eating. In fact, his first words are a quote from Ludwig Feurbach (firey brook), the German atheist philosopher, “Man is what he eats”. Being a materialist Feurbach thought that pretty much summed up human existence in a nutshell, and that it should put to rest any notions of God or spiritual existence since they were no longer needed. Schmemmann takes this view and turns it on its head. He suggests that it is one of the most religious/spiritual things that can be claimed about humanity. By hearkening back to Genesis, the gifts of the land and herbs and food, humans have gathered and partaken. Being fed is the most basic aspect necessary for an infant to survive. At the heart of our connections is the act of gathering and eating for it brings us together. Schmemmann says, “it draws us right down to creation and God. Man must eat to live and take the world into his body and transform it into himself...the whole world is part of the heavenly banquet”. This is at the heart of the miracle of our communal existence—with one another and with the maker of heaven and earth. It should be no surprise that this story of the 5,000 is in every Gospel account because it is at the heart of our journey. It points us to what, or rather who, we have been looking for and who gives us life.

We are what we eat. We take him into ourselves and we become transformed. This is summed up well in a prayer after communion from an older liturgical rite: “Almighty God, who gives the true bread from heaven, even your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Grant that we who have received the Sacrament of his Body and Blood may abide in him and he in us, that we may be filled with the power of his endless life. Amen”. Filled with life—this is what we are looking for. Join the feast. Amen+