

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost 1 August 2021

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 / Psalm 78:23-29 / Ephesians 4:1-16 / John 6:24-35

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

It's so nice to see everyone this morning, and I hope you enjoyed meeting Pastor Marty last Sunday. I enjoyed the time off, and feel refreshed and happy to be back among you. And just in time for the picnic later this morning!

Speaking of group meals, I missed last week's story of the feeding of the five thousand, a story that sets up the next few weeks as we explore Jesus both giving and being the food that does not perish, that sustains us, bringing us new life now and always.

Today we heard another familiar passage from Saint John's Gospel, when Jesus announces that he himself is the Bread of Life. And, we got to hear about some unsatisfied people, who we might even call "hangry" crowds. (that combination of being hungry and angry at the same time)

Back before the land of Canaan was colonized and the people there were united as Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish people were nomads, living in what the Hebrew Scriptures call "the wilderness." We read today from the book of Exodus, which kind of

breaks down this saga of the Hebrews into three periods: Egypt, the time of slavery; the wilderness, which is the in-between, “what happens in the wilderness stays in the wilderness” time; and finally settling in Canaan, the Promised Land.

It was tough to survive in the wilderness, people always searching for food. So they were frustrated, ready to see their past time of slavery through rose-colored glasses, as being in a civilized place that was nothing like what they were going through. Yet even as they’re blaming the Lord for their troubles, God responds to the peoples’ need, with bread from heaven that keeps them alive.

I’m revisiting these points because we encounter a second group of “hangry” people in the gospel reading. And it’s the same crowd that last week had barley loaves and fishes, courtesy of Jesus Christ.

That meal must’ve been a surprise to everyone but Jesus, a nice surprise as opposed to those surprises that keep us off balance or upset us. A free, unexpected dinner when you’re hungry is a really nice surprise. And do you remember what happened afterwards? Jesus kind of vanished after the meal, which left the people confused and disappointed.

So they track Jesus down on the other side of the lake. And in today’s reading, Jesus pretty much suggests they’ve followed him for another free meal. And he lectures the

people, telling them not to work for the food that spoils, but rather the food that lasts for eternal life.

This was another surprise, a tempting one. The crowd asks, So what do we have to do to get this food, and Jesus answers, “Just believe, that I am the one that God sent.”

This is also a confusing surprise. Jesus is offering the cash and prizes everyone wants – the bread of life, the nectar of the gods, eternal life. So the people are skeptical. Oh, yeah? You can do that? Prove it.

This is how we react sometimes to the Good News. What if it isn't true? How could it be true? The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the sacraments come along, and they disrupt our orderly lives where everything's more or less arranged, and they surprise us with these amazing promises of life and wholeness.

Many of us are pretty used to building a life for ourselves amid the pain and frustration and despair of our world. Even if we feel like there's something missing, a God-shaped hole in our lives we can't describe or even acknowledge. Then these promises of God are announced that expose the folly of our self-reliance, that promise more than we could ever hope for – abundant life beyond our wildest dreams.

Let's look at the sacrament of holy baptism, which we've celebrated even during the pandemic. We've had a stream of babies baptized whose parents waited until they could safely come to church, where we pour water over their baby's head and tell her God has promised to be with her forever, wherever she may go, and will hold onto her through whatever life may bring, even death, and granting her life eternal. And BTW another baby will be joining us next Sunday to receive this promise, and several more in the weeks to come.

The same thing happens during the Lord's Supper, even when we're sitting in the pews instead of together at the rail, opening up these little cups of elements encased in plastic. The externals don't change the amazing promise we receive of forgiveness, and acceptance and wholeness of life.

The thing about presence and acceptance and forgiveness is, we can't earn them or buy them. Like love, they can only be given as a gift. The sacraments are God's words of love and forgiveness given to us in a form we can receive: physical, visible words for God's physical, visible people.

Promises like this, and like Jesus' words to the crowd today, can be as frightening as they are comforting. They raise our hopes and expectations so high. We're like the crowds

who ask Jesus which miracle he'll be performing "so that we may see it and believe you." Wouldn't faith come easier if God would just give us a big old miracle the way we'd like God to?

But God rarely does what God's "supposed" to do. Our God is full of surprises and upheavals. Instead of what God's supposed to do, God does the unexpected: instead of pronouncing judgment on our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy. Instead of justice, love; instead of condemnation, God offers forgiveness. Instead of coming in power, coming in weakness; and instead of giving us a miracle, giving us God's own self in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps that's what's hardest to accept about the sacraments: God's gift of self. We are completely disarmed and helpless, in the face of such love as God's promise to us in holy communion, just as when as babies we are brought to the font.

Martin Luther said the whole story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are summed up in two words heard at communion: "for you." Body of Christ, given for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. A modern theologian, Gordon Lathrop, calls communion "the hungry feast." A sip of wine and a morsel of bread bring the gifts of forgiveness and salvation. A meal that satisfies our deepest desires also creates a hunger, for peace and

justice. We are fed, that we might feed others. We receive the body of Christ so that we can be the body of Christ in the world.

As the psalmist calls it, the bread of angels. As the writer of our second reading describes, in Christ we can live out how God has made us to be. And a sign of our standing is unity, with no walls between us as we live in the reality of God's own self, God who is "above all and through all and in all."

We're invited to demonstrate the unity of the Spirit through our conduct, relating to each other with patience and acceptance. Lifting each other up rather than tearing each other down. Being cooperative rather than competitive. And, within the oneness, living into the gift of our diversity, with all the members of the body equipped for service to sustain our community in the unity of Christ.

So to him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.