

St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Sermon: Proper 15B

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I AM the Living Bread

by the Rev. Barbara Stewart

“You are what you eat.” Literally. The food you consume gets broken down into its component parts and sent throughout your body where those amino acids, under the direction of your DNA and rRNA, tRNA, and mRNA, are assembled into you, blood and heart and muscle and bone, all the parts of you. (Sorry, I used to teach biology.)

On another level, remember your mother saying you had to eat all your vegetables so you would grow up properly? A child who fails to receive proper nutrition might not develop properly, or may become sick, or even die. Eating food high in cholesterol can produce heart disease. A diet with an excess of sugar may lead to diabetes. A balanced, healthy diet can help one grow and live well. You are what you eat.

Jesus says to the crowd, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

You can almost hear the mutterings in the crowd: really? Eat his flesh? And drink his blood? You’ve got to be kidding! It was amazing, watching Jesus giving sight to the blind and making the lame walk; even feeding 5,000 people – that was all okay and appreciated; but what’s all this talk about giving his flesh? Who does he think he is?

Jesus is speaking to those who followed him to Capernaum following the feeding of the 5,000. They had seen what Jesus could do; and, as the time of Passover was approaching, Jesus’ actions and words would have been in that context. God provided for God’s people with manna in the wilderness; now Jesus is providing bread for them all to eat. God brought God’s people from slavery to freedom; now Jesus brings them from death to life.

Manna, yes, bread for the day, but more than that: living bread, Jesus' own self. Day to day life, yes, but more than that: life, full and abundant, now and for ever.

"I am the living bread." Living, coming from the living Father. Flesh and blood, truly the Son of God and the Son of Man, both human and divine. In the beginning of John's Gospel we hear the words, "What has come into being in him was life;" "and the Word became flesh and lived among us." So not just a lesson in history, not just a meal to satisfy the immediate hunger, but the living One, God's own self.

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever." Jesus, the living bread, offers himself to us, that we might live.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we have accounts of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. We recall this each time we celebrate the Eucharist. "Take, eat, this is my Body, which is given for you." "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood...which is shed for you."

In our church, Holy Eucharist is a sacrament: "sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." Outward and visible signs – bread and wine – of inward and spiritual grace, the Body and Blood of Christ, given to his people.

I love that we have both – the ever so Episcopal, both/and – we are human beings, with physical bodies, and with minds and hearts; we need to know and to experience, we need to be reminded, we need to live, the reality of Christ's life, the reality of Christ giving Christ's self for us. We hear the words, together we eat, together we drink. This is my Body, this is my Blood. We are fed physically.

And we are nourished, we are fed, deep within us, our very being. You are what you eat: to be transformed, to become more and more who God calls us to be, to be called into relationship with God in Christ. Do we get it right all the time? Are we fully who God calls us to be? We don't have to look too

far to see that we are works in process; the journey in Christ is that, a journey, as we grow and move forward and fall back and start again, a journey, with all its ups and downs. But always nourished and fed and surrounded by the love of God.

As we celebrate the Sacrament, we are invited to ask ourselves how we are fed. It's that same both/and – we are physical beings, we need food and housing, we need clothing and community and are enriched with art and music. But is that all? Is all that we need satisfied with these things? Do they make up all of the full and abundant life promised by Christ?

In John's gospel there is no account of the Words of Institution, no Last Supper narrative. The section of the Gospel we have been reading for the last couple of weeks comes during the first year of Jesus' three years of ministry. Perhaps one lesson from this is that all of Jesus' life matters: from his birth in Bethlehem to Golgotha and beyond to the empty tomb and the appearances to his disciples and his ascension. "I am the living bread; the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Living bread: the day to day stuff of our lives. Not just the go-to-church-on-Sunday mode, not just at the end of our life, but each day, every day. Living bread, for all of our life; abundant life, fed by the living bread. We are invited into relationship with God, to abide in God. Not a word we use too often – abide - but a powerful one; Jesus said, "Abide in me, as I in you...As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." To abide implies a relationship, a permanent one, one that provides nourishment and shelter. We become part of the vine, part of the abiding, part of the fruit. You are what you eat.

And we are reminded that this living bread was given for the life of the world. It's not just all about me. It's not just about people who look like me or think like me or talk like me. God's love is for the world; what is our part in helping to show that, in helping to live that?

In Jerusalem, there is a small church on a hill overlooking the city, called Dominus Flevit, Jesus wept. It was built in 1954, and is in the shape of a tear. It was built on the ruins of a 7th century church; you can still see some

of the original mosaics from the early church. The name comes from the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. At one end of the church is a big circular window which overlooks the city; in the center of the window in wrought iron is a chalice and wafer, and around the perimeter are representations of vines. When you stand in the church, you look through the window out at Jerusalem where Jesus preached and taught and died and rose again-life framed by the Eucharist, life framed by the living bread, life in Jesus, bordered by, seen through, and defined by Jesus.

We don't live in Jerusalem, but we can see life that way.

You are invited; come, eat, and live.